

## **ANALYSIS: The acting prime minister**

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It was only three years ago that Ehud Olmert stepped down as Jerusalem mayor to reenter national politics.

The 36 history-filled months which followed seem this week - as the vice premier was officially named acting prime minister following the massive stroke suffered by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Wednesday night - more like three light years.

When Olmert left city hall in the winter of 2003, many Jerusalem residents were sorry to lose their famously hawkish Jerusalem mayor whose impassioned sans-script speeches about Jerusalem, and "the eternal capital of the Jewish people" endeared him among the predominantly hawkish Jewish residents of the city, even as he was continually assailed by his left-wing critics for his running of the city.

Concomitantly revered and reviled, the ever-opinionated Olmert always made the news with his blunt, no-nonsense opinions; he was continually the talk of town.

As much as he was well-liked among hawkish resident of the city, Olmert was never your typical rightist.

Already last decade, Olmert had lost favor with the Likud after publicly averring during the 1999 election campaign that former prime minister Ehud Barak would never divide Jerusalem, support that cost him dearly within the Likud rank and file (who dealt him a stinging defeat in a long-forgotten Likud vote where he ran against a then pariah Likud legislator, by the name of Ariel Sharon).

Olmert's distance from the Likud would only grow in the years to come.

When he joined up with Sharon in 2003, Olmert quickly set his sights on the foreign ministry or the finance ministry but was forced to make do with the more lowly Ministry for Industry and Trade due to a motley of political considerations.

Not to be undone or overrun, Olmert was subsequently given a sweetener by Sharon: the title of deputy prime minister, and acting prime minister. (In an ironic twist, he later went on to assume the position of finance minister he once so badly coveted after Binyamin Netanyahu quit the government on the eve of the Gaza pullout last year.)

Over the next three years, the 60-year-old Olmert, who in contrast to his obese mentor is known for his daily early-morning exercise routine - quickly became Sharon's closest confidant, and was often the first to go public with future government policy.

First, in what was widely viewed as a trial balloon, he called for unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank just weeks ahead of a similar move by Sharon three years

ago.

Then, in a major about-face, he told *The Jerusalem Post* in 2004 that he favored ceding at least six outlying east Jerusalem Arab neighborhoods to the Palestinians as part of final peace treaty.

In a subsequent Post interview Olmert opined that Israel will need to carry out a second large-scale disengagement from the West Bank after the Gaza pullout, whether or not a viable peace partner emerges on the Palestinian side.

Last year, he reiterated in public remarks that the Gaza pullout was not a trade-off for the West Bank.

He subsequently confirmed that a controversial Israeli building plan between Jerusalem and the nearby West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim had been indefinitely frozen in the wake of American pressure.

Like those of the prime minister, Olmert's unabashed and increasingly centrist positions put him at odds with the more traditional right-wing view taken by the Likud.

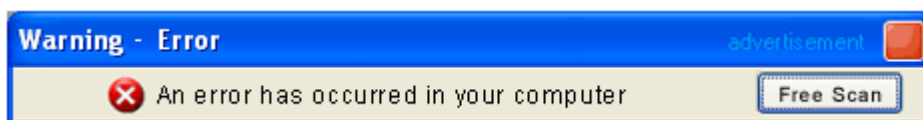
His lowly 33rd ranking on the Likud list was indicative of his striking unpopularity on his 'home base.'

As such, it was hardly a surprise that Olmert was one of the most fervent backers of the initiative for Sharon to bolt the Likud and form a new centrist party, where he would be the senior number two, and where the premier would be free to lead the country without the shackles of the Likud rebels.

The major political gamble appeared to pay off over the last couple months with public opinion polls forecasting a landslide victory for Sharon's new party at the polls.

What was never considered -- or at least never mentioned -- was that the heretofore robust Sharon would fall so critically ill even before the elections took place, suddenly thrusting Olmert into the number one slot in the country.

Inadvertently, if Sharon fails to recover, Olmert now has a shot at being elected prime minister if he manages to both garner the support of his party, and that of a possible rival, Shimon Peres, to reach the critical face-off with his chief political nemesis, Binyamin Netanyahu.



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