



opinion דעות

Olmert's obsession

Outgoing prime minister has irrational obsession with Palestinian prisoner releases

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The world is reeling from the Islamist terror attacks that [struck](#) India this week. But [Prime Minister Ehud Olmert](#) will not let that interfere with his plans. In just a few days he will beef up terrorist ranks with another of his prisoner releases.

Trying to fathom Mr. Olmert's conduct has become a favorite pastime of the pundits. Some say he is drafting his page in future history books. Others claim he is simply hell-bent on wooing the radical leftists. Still others swear he aims to be the next Israeli come-back kid and is preparing for a future term as prime minister.

But no theory explicates his irrational obsession with Palestinian prisoner releases. He is drawn to them like a mouse to cheese.

Three months ago Olmert gave [PA President Mahmoud Abbas](#), a Ramadan release. Now he will hand Abbas 250 more prisoners ahead of the Eid al-Adha festival on 8 December. Olmert is unfazed by the thankless reaction to his last release: "We will not rest until all the prisoners are freed and the jails are empty," Abbas told a cheering crowd in August on the day those 198 prisoners were welcomed home.

Abbas' statements and conduct are never factored in to the equation.

The day before Olmert announced the upcoming release, Abbas said of his "partner for peace":

"I would like to draw the attention of the international community to the tragedy that our people are enduring in Gaza and I call on them to intervene to end the unfair siege... which constitutes a war crime."

[Hamas](#)' renewed and intensive [Qassam attacks](#) that week on Israeli civilians apparently did not interest him.

Abbas responded to the announcement of a fresh release with fresh demands: He instructed Olmert to include convicted murderer Marwan Barghouti along with Popular Front Secretary General Ahmad Sadat and Palestinian Legislative Council Speaker and Hamas member Aziz al-Dweik.

The PA president's rhetoric has never softened towards [Israel](#). In September, for instance, during a meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Abbas was still adamant that "Palestinian refugees must have the right to return to their homeland," one of the "inalienable Palestinian rights." Everyone knows that a call for the return of the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees is a thinly-veiled call for the destruction of the Jewish state. Yet today Olmert's office dubbed Abbas' party "the pragmatist Palestinian camp."

Equally immaterial to Olmert is that Abbas is politically crippled beyond the lame duck stage. He is unlikely to survive as president past 9 January, 2009. Nor does it matter to him that Hamas – against whom Olmert claims to be propping up the PA – is never weakened by these releases.

Israel's terror victims are always incensed by these releases. After all, we, the bereaved, live with the dread that one day our own child's murderer will return home to a hero's welcome.

A terror victims organization called Almagor reminded everyone that no less than one third of released terrorists return to terror and that they have murdered 180 Israelis. Once the new list of prisoners is published, Almagor can be expected to appeal to the High Court – and to lose its case, as it has consistently.

An Israeli spokesman insisted that: "the prisoners slated for release would not be aligned with Islamist movements," and that they will sign vows never to return to terror activities. But he was paid no heed.

Olmert's immense ego

Why should he be? One of the two prisoners with blood on their hands who were among those freed in August was Mohammed

Abu Ali, a lawmaker from Abbas' Fatah party. Abu Ali was jailed in 1980 for murdering a 20-year-old Israeli. He was later convicted of killing a jailed Palestinian whom he accused of collaborating with Israel. So much for the claim that these prisoners have all been rehabilitated.

What about the Palestinian man-on-the-street? Surely he appreciates Olmert's largess.

Not quite. In August, prior to the Ramadan release, Khaled Abu Toameh reported: "It's hard these days to find one Palestinian who regards Israel's decision to release some 200 Palestinian prisoners as a "goodwill gesture." He added: "The argument that (releases) strengthen the 'moderates' has never proven to be correct."

Of the hundreds of prisoners released after the Oslo Accord, Abu Toameh wrote, many soon became involved "in various criminal activities ranging from armed robberies, extortion, theft and arms trafficking...Others later joined Hamas and other radical groups and became actively involved in armed attacks on Israel during the second Intifada."

Orit Adato, a former head of the Israel Prisons Service and the first international vice president of the International Correction and Prison Association has issued clear and reasoned expert recommendations regarding prisoner releases.

In principle Adato believes they can be utilized to bolster Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority. However, even she maintains that releases should be made only after specific preparatory steps have been carried out by Israelis, Palestinians and the international community.

She condemns capricious releases, a la Olmert, made in the context of stalled and aimless negotiations between Israel and the PA.

But even if they could be otherwise condoned, Olmert's prisoner releases are objectionable in his circumstances. As he contends with a looming indictment and with strident calls for his resignation, Olmert is no longer an empowered leader.

Nevertheless, this week a passive cabinet voted to give Olmert the green light. True, several ministers were opposed. Minister Jacob Edery (Kadima) slammed the move prior to the meeting, saying Israel "has made enough gestures to the Palestinians without having received anything in return. You don't have to free terrorists so long as there is no progress in the effort to free Gilad Shalit or the peace talks."

And last week Likud MK Reuven Rivlin expressed those sentiments even more bluntly: "Olmert is not relevant to the political process and he does not need to make promises in Israel's name," adding: "We're tired of him and his political mischief."

But Sunday's vote proved that even this wide spectrum of protesters is impotent. Olmert's immense and indomitable ego is just too formidable a foe. Several days ago it reared its ugly head in these telling comments:

"I talk with Abbas nearly every week. Never has any Israeli prime minister held such extensive negotiations with a Palestinian leader like this...This is a time for decisions. I am ready to make that decision...You don't need months to make a decision," said Olmert.

On the last score he is right. Olmert can and must still make one crucial decision: to forgo the tempting cheese and cancel this prisoner release before the mouse trap slams shut – on us. Otherwise the painful consequences of Olmert's folly will be with us long after he has scampered back through his hole to safety.
