

## Our World: What commissions cannot do

Caroline Glick , THE JERUSALEM POST

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When thousands of IDF reservists were released from service at the end of last summer's war they were angry and demanded an accounting from the Olmert-Livni-Peretz government and from the IDF's General Staff.

The reservists rightly felt that they and the country had been betrayed by failed political and military leaders who chose the wrong strategy, prosecuted it incompetently, and led the IDF and the nation to an ignominious defeat that could have been a victory if they had been less incompetent, arrogant and foolish.

- **Israeli, US and Arab newspaper covers**

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert saw the thousands of reservists organizing hunger strikes and demonstrations, and families whose sons had been killed, and residents of the North all joining together. He heard their call for his resignation and he did what any self-respecting political hack would do in his position. He formed a commission.

Generally speaking, commissions are formed in times of political crisis by politicians and other interested parties that wish to kick the can down the road. The hope is that by the time the commission publishes its report no one will remember the crisis that spurred its formation, and so no price will have to be paid by whoever failed in their duties and so fomented the crisis in the first place.

IN THE case of the Second Lebanon War the idea for a commission came from the Left. Led in this case by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Left demanded a commission in order to prevent elections from being called. The Left understood that the Right would win elections and therefore just as the reservists were getting their footing, backed by Peace Now and Meretz, ACRI put out the call for a commission.

But Olmert felt that an official state inquiry headed by the Left's favorite - the Supreme Court - would be a bit too risky. So he hit on the idea of appointing his own commission. That is how the Winograd Commission, which released its interim report yesterday, was born.

Although this column is being written before publication of the Winograd Commission's interim report, several observations can already be made.

First, it is worth noting just how narrow the focus of the report actually is. The interim report discusses the period between the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 and the sixth day of last summer's war. By deciding to ignore the IDF withdrawal that precipitated the Hizbullah takeover of south Lebanon, the commission evaded the necessary discussion of what prompted Ehud Barak's government to make the decision that paved the way for Hizbullah's kidnappings and the eventual war.

Over the weekend, *Ma'ariv* reported protocols of cabinet meetings in the weeks which preceded the 2000 withdrawal where then IDF chief of staff Shaul Mofaz and then IDF OC Northern Command Gabi Ashkenazi

begged Barak not to go through with the withdrawal precisely because the Hizbullah buildup and aggression were so predictable.

The withdrawal from south Lebanon was fomented by the Left with the propaganda support of the Israeli media and the financial support of the EU.

Together, they worked to destroy the public consensus regarding the need to protect the North from Hizbullah and Iran. They propagated the lies that unilateral withdrawal would create an "invisible wall of international legitimacy" that would protect Israel from Hizbullah better than the IDF could, and that if Israel withdrew to the international border Hizbullah would abandon jihad and become a regular Lebanese political party.

But the Winograd report will not discuss such things, because it conveniently decided to begin its inquiry with the period after the IDF had already surrendered southern Lebanon to Hizbullah.

THEN THERE is the seemingly arbitrary decision by the committee to extend its interim inquiry only until the fifth day of the war. Whatever the reason for this bizarre choice, it betrays the ideological composition of the Olmert-appointed committee that seeks to shift the focus away from the government's incompetence in prosecuting the war to the very decision to respond militarily to Hizbullah's aggression.

On the fifth day of the war, things were still looking fairly good. The Air Force had concentrated its bombings on readily available targets and had obliterated them. Public support for the war and the government was sky-high. It was in the last four weeks of the war - not covered by the interim report - where the full brunt of the government's incompetence came to the fore.

It was during those last four weeks that the government repeatedly refused to call up the reserves in spite of the public outcry and the tactical necessity of a large-scale ground operation. It was in the last four weeks that the government repeatedly changed its plans and goals and so sent troops into battles that had no strategic end or operational logic.

It was in the two days that the government finally decided to launch the ground campaign that it knew could make no difference to the outcome of the war since it began after the UN Security Council had approved the cease-fire agreement.

ISSUING A harsh report that covers only the initial five days of the war insinuates that the war was a failure not due to bad war leadership, but rather because a wise government would have opted not to go to war at all but rather continued the business-as-usual response to post-withdrawal Hizbullah aggressions: paying ransom, releasing terrorists and burying dead Israelis.

Furthermore, throughout its inquiry, the Winograd Commission ignored the very nature of war itself. War after all, is not just the military battles. It is the mobilization of the resources of society to improve the position of the state vis-a-vis its enemies. And, as Israelis know only too well, war is ultimately won or lost in the world chanceries, not on the battlefield.

Yet the commission completely ignored this fact and so ignored the diplomatic campaign of the war and its disastrous conclusions. In absolute terms it could be said that the diplomatic campaign was a far worse failure than the military campaign. At least when IDF units were allowed to fight Hizbullah they defeated them. But in the diplomatic campaign Israel scored no points at all.

Israel began the war in arguably the best diplomatic position it had ever enjoyed. The G-8 endorsed Israel's

right to win. The US was strongly behind it. Then Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni took the helm and capsized the ship of state.

Livni decided that it would be better for Israel if there were international forces deployed along the border. This was an assumption based on the same "invisible wall of international legitimacy" delusion that had failed to prevent Hizbullah from carrying out the kidnappings and missile attacks that precipitated the war in the first place.

Today, as now, Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi has just explained to the government, Hizbullah has rearmed and is reinforcing its forces in south Lebanon to return them to their pre-war strength. This it does under the protective gaze of the international force Livni was so keen to see in action. And due to the Livni-midwifed UNIFIL forces, Israel now risks an international scandal if it takes action against Hizbullah. Indeed, it was only because of some fancy footwork by opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu and former minister Natan Sharansky that Livni didn't get her wish to have the entire cease-fire resolution fall under Article 7 of the UN Charter. Had that occurred it would have increased the already-present risk of any future Israeli move against Hizbullah bringing the UN-mandated international force to the defense of Hizbullah, against Israel.

ONE COULD console oneself by saying that at least there is a commission for the Second Lebanon War. Three greater strategic failures that all devastated Israel's defensive posture have gone without any scrutiny whatsoever.

First, Barak's precipitous surrender of southern Lebanon to Hizbullah has avoided scrutiny not only by the Winograd Commission but by all other official bodies.

The second failure also played an important role in the Second Lebanon War, but has escaped examination. This is the Sharon government's decision to hand over the Gaza Strip in its entirety to Hamas and Fatah while expelling 10,000 Jews from their homes. This not only ensconced a Hamas-Fatah jihadist army within striking range of Israel's major population centers and cemented the belief that Palestinian terrorism would bring about Israel's national collapse through the gradual handover of all Israeli territory to terrorists; it also provided a safe base of operations for terrorists to conduct operations like the kidnapping of IDF Cpl. Gilad Schalit.

And, of course, the grandest of all Israeli failures was the Rabin-Peres government's decision to recognize the PLO and give it arms, land and legitimacy, ushering in the most deadly period of terrorism in Israel's history. This decision too, has never been scrutinized by a commission.

But, truly, the great pity is not that no commissions were formed to investigate these failures, as the Winograd Commission was formed to investigate the Second Lebanon War. The great pity is that Israeli society has yet to find the means to conduct a true public debate of our failures that could enable learning and corrective action.

If the Winograd report is to have any positive impact at all, it should be in beginning, not blocking the necessary public debate into the real sources of the failures last summer, and into the strategic failures of the Oslo process, and the withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza. All of these call out for our attention and correction.

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