

# The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

## Mr. Olmert's Farewell

The departing Israeli prime minister endorses a withdrawal policy his own government failed to uphold.

**A**FTER ISRAELI Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was voted out of office in 1992, he gave an interview in which he revealed he had never been serious about peace negotiations with the Palestinians. His real intention, he said, had been to drag out the talks for a decade while settling hundreds of thousands more Jews in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Last week, Ehud Olmert, who served in Mr. Shamir's cabinet and believed in his dream of a "greater Israel," gave a similar truth-telling interview at the end of his own stint as prime minister — only the message was very different.

"We have to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, the meaning of which is that in practice we will withdraw from almost all the territories," Mr. Olmert told the newspaper Yedioth Aharonot. Of his long record as a supporter of keeping and settling those lands and Arab East Jerusalem, Mr. Olmert said, "For a large portion of these years, I was unwilling to look at reality in all its depth."

Mr. Olmert's words are one measure of how far Israel has changed politically in 16 years. Before 1992, acceptance of a Palestinian state or even direct negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization were unacceptable to the parliamentary majority; now a former leader of the right-wing Likud party can say that Israel must withdraw from all but a small part of the territories captured in the 1967 war. Mr. Olmert's position is pragmatic: He

says that the territorial concessions are necessary to prevent Israel from becoming a "binational state," with an Arab majority. Judging from polls, a majority of Israelis agree with him.

Yet in another sense Mr. Olmert has hardly altered Israel's policy. During his nearly two years as prime minister, his government has pursued the same settlement-expansion policy that Mr. Shamir favored. According to the Israeli group Peace Now, the pace of settlement construction nearly doubled during Mr. Olmert's time as prime minister, and the number of Israelis living in the West Bank increased by more than 10 percent, to 290,000. The new homes are going up not just in settlements close to Israel, which could be annexed as part of a peace accord, but in areas deep in the West Bank — including outposts that Mr. Olmert's government had declared illegal and promised to dismantle.

What's changed in Israel is the willingness of the political mainstream to accept, in theory, a Palestinian state along territorial lines that most of the world (including most Arab states) would accept. What hasn't changed is the steady pace of settlement construction that is slowly but surely making that solution more difficult to carry out — and the unwillingness or inability of Israeli leaders to stop it. Mr. Olmert tried to make history with his parting words; sadly, they were deeply at odds with his actions.