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Israelis Lose Faith in New Generation Of Leaders

Doubts Heightened By War in Lebanon

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JERUSALEM, Sept. 16 -- Frustration over the outcome of the war in Lebanon has spurred many Israelis to question the abilities of a new class of political professionals who are stepping into roles long held by the men and women who founded the Jewish state.

The mostly East European immigrants who brought Israel into being are steadily ceding power to a more ethnically and ideologically diverse generation raised here. Now the uncertain aftermath of the first war to be managed by a prime minister from outside Israel's founding generation -- Ehud Olmert, a 60-year-old lawyer elected this year -- has sharpened debate over whether the best of the new generation are entering public life.

"How have we left our leadership to such mediocre people?" said Eliad Shraga, 46, head of the nonpartisan Movement for Quality Government in Israel who staged a nearly three-week hunger strike outside Olmert's office after returning from reserve duty in the Lebanon war. "We are asking ourselves how this has happened to us."

Olmert and others of his political generation embody a leadership shift that highlights the Jewish state's changing values and demographics.

Israel's original socialist character has evolved into a more free-market economy and less centralized government. The private sector and town councils are turning into training grounds for new political leaders, who once emerged largely from the labor movement, the kibbutz collective-farm enterprise and the military. There are more former mayors than generals in Olmert's cabinet, which also includes ministers from university faculties and the secret services.

But prospective Israeli leaders have found the diverse economy more attractive than public life, a notoriously treacherous arena given the country's cutthroat political culture. Israel's mainstream political leadership now consists mostly of pragmatic men and women who have made politics their profession -- a sharp contrast to the ideological volunteers, shaped by persecution, who founded Israel nearly six decades ago.

Historians and sociologists describe the change as the kind of natural evolution that occurs in most countries. But it is proving more complicated here because of Israel's unique circumstances -- a state still defining its borders, in a region where many countries dispute its right to exist.

"A nation cannot always be in a revolutionary spirit," said Ephraim Yaar, a professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University who runs the Evens Program in Mediation and

Conflict Resolution. "People want to live normal lives. But in some ways, Israel cannot give up this spirit because of the peculiar existential threat it faces. We are still in the process of nation-building."

Isaac Herzog, the 46-year-old tourism minister, is one of Israel's political "princes."

His father, Chaim Herzog, built Israel's military intelligence agency before serving as ambassador to the United Nations and the country's president. His grandfather was Israel's first chief rabbi, and one of his handwritten prayers for the new state hangs on Herzog's office wall.

As a boy, Herzog's neighbors in Zahala, a suburb of Tel Aviv, included Moshe Dayan, Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon, hero-generals of the wars and political battles that helped define the modern state.

"My father and his compatriots focused on security and the economy, but I became interested early on with talking to the Palestinians and in issues like the environment and human rights," said Herzog, who speaks Arabic.

"The whole system of values has changed," he continued. "I would say our generation is more willing to compromise, less willing to see ideology as holy."

Olmert is also a second-generation politician. Elected to parliament at the age of 28, he is Israel's third prime minister from outside the founding generation. When Sharon, 78, was felled by a stroke in January, Olmert assumed the top job and was elected on his own in March, on a platform to withdraw Israel from parts of the West Bank and define the state's final borders. The plan has been shelved since the war, and the Israeli public is waiting for another to replace it.

Olmert's foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, whose popularity plummeted during the war, is the daughter of a leader of Irgun, the Zionist militia that attacked British forces and civilian targets before Israel's creation.

Both Olmert and Livni, 48, also a lawyer by training, left the Likud party last year to join Sharon's Kadima movement -- evidence, political analysts say, that the politicians now in charge are less ideological than those of the past.

The only member of Olmert's cabinet who played a vital role in Israel's political life before the founding of the state is Shimon Peres, the 83-year-old vice prime minister and Nobel Peace laureate who left the Labor Party last year after losing his bid to lead it.

"I think this shows we are now a more normal society, one without stars," Herzog said. "Stars just fall into the bureaucracy."

Recent opinion polls show that a large majority of Israelis believe the previous leaders were better than the current ones, while one in five Israelis does not think any of the senior party leaders is suitable to be prime minister. When the Marker, a business supplement published by the daily newspaper Haaretz, revealed its picks for the 100

Israelis with the most influence over the economy, no name appeared in the top slot, only the words: "Leader Wanted!"

"These new politicians don't regard themselves as mythological figures, nor does the public view them that way," said Tom Segev, a prominent Israeli historian and author of several influential books on the state's formative years. "And on the healthy side, the public no longer has giants it will blindly trust."

Segev contends that "for most Israelis, the founding giants are more about what they symbolized than who they actually were. They were overly mythologized, and now many enjoy an image that is just not justified."

While less trusting, the public is also more angry, particularly over a flurry of corruption scandals involving Israel's senior politicians and Olmert's refusal to allow an independent commission to examine the recent war's management.

The military, traditionally the country's most esteemed institution, is investigating itself at a time of pervasive anger among reserve officers. Many of them have criticized military commanders and civilian leaders for providing insufficient supplies and equipment during the fight, as well as for a tentative battle plan they contend prolonged the conflict and endangered Israeli soldiers and civilians.

Yaar's monthly "peace index" tracking poll showed a large drop last month in support for the military, along with other public institutions. Yaar noted that the marks for Olmert's government and the parliament "were already extremely low in the past and they did not have much space to shrink further."

"A war we don't win is a war we lose," said Zeev Sternhell, who fought in four of Israel's wars and is author of "The Founding Myths of Israel." "We have never been through such a loss of faith in the political and military leadership at the same time. I'm afraid people are beginning to lose confidence in the system itself."

Israeli politicians say the business sector could be the next source of political leadership. But sociologists argue that Israel's high-tech entrepreneurs, known for risk-taking and creativity, will likely be discouraged from entering the rough spectacle of Israeli politics.

"Israel has been very rude to people who want to volunteer their talents to public life, and by that I mean cynicism, which just kills everything," said Erel Margalit, managing partner of Jerusalem Venture Partners, a venture-capital firm with interests in high-tech businesses. "I think a few of us will jump, whether it's me or someone else. It depends on the timing and opportunity."

Margalit, 45, is mentioned frequently as a possible candidate for mayor of Jerusalem, where he lives and supports a number of arts projects. He was raised on a kibbutz and supported Labor Party leader Amir Peretz's bid for the prime ministership in March. Peretz, now Israel's highly unpopular defense minister, once embodied the promising rise of Jewish immigrants of North African and Middle Eastern descent in a society long dominated by European Jews.

"For a lot of us, the legacy of our grandfathers -- that we came here not just to make a profit -- is still there," Margalit said. "We don't want to be socialist, or at least not a part of the 1917 revolution. But we do want to use the same kind of sensitivities found on the kibbutz when things get difficult."

The idealists of today are lonely.

Daniel Kayros, 35, passed up the large-salary life of a corporate lawyer to run the fiscal litigation department of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel. He manned a tent for weeks across from Olmert's office festooned with banners declaring, "You Lost The North," a play on words meaning the government had lost both its support in the Galilee region and its direction.

"Against the backdrop of the amazing historic story of this country, to see the crumbling of government morals is extremely discouraging," said Kayros, who immigrated to Israel from Wisconsin at 19. "To me, it is an emergency call to the flag. I only wish more of the country felt that way."