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An Open Letter to Prime Minister Sharon

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Title: An Open Letter to Prime Minister Sharon

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Abstract. The following article (with very minor editing by IBPP) was written by Dai Williams, a psychologist who works in the United Kingdom. It was written on March 19, 2001 but still retains much of political psychological import given events in the Mideast. The author may be reached at eosuk@btinternet.com or through <http://www.eoslifework.co.uk>.

Dear Prime Minister Sharon:

---Managing Transitions in Israel

I write to offer you encouragement and some cautions for your first year in office. These concern potential post-election and Intifada transitions in Israel. These may be relevant for you, the new Government, troops, and Israeli and Arab communities.

Similar Issues may affect President Bush's new administration. You both took office recently, so you may face similar leadership hazards and opportunities at similar times in the coming months. It is good you can meet this week.

I think that you have more experience with getting new command structures up to speed than he has. But you both have new organisations where others may be less prepared for adapting to periods of trauma and change, in addition to the practical tasks of government.

1. Transitions in Governments and Communities

The idea of a "Presidential transition" is recognized for new administrations in the United States of America (USA). But for work and organizational psychologists, transition describes the process by which all individuals and organisations respond and adapt to major traumas or changes.

You may already be aware of transition management--used in business to manage periods of organisational change. I am also interested in how this can be of use to governments and communities.

New governments that involve a change of power are likely to go through a post-election transition period in their first year. In its first year (1997-98), the new Parliament of the United Kingdom (UK) went through the typical stages of honeymoon, crisis, and recovery. Leaders and organisations aware of this process can manage periods of transition to minimise hazards and to harness opportunities.

The transition process also affects how individuals, organizations, and communities respond to loss or trauma--e.g., after conflicts, disasters, or electoral defeats. Early reactions include shock and denial leading to a deeper crisis stage but still with potential for recovery.

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In a coalition government, members may be in a variety of conditions in the first few months--some in honeymoon, others in denial. But after 3-4 months, most members will have to work through the deeper challenges of new roles, policies, events, and adaptation to new alliances.

My most urgent concern is that a post-trauma transition is likely to be reaching a crisis point this month in Arab and Israeli communities and in Yasir Arafat's administration--a delayed reaction to high casualties at the start of the current Intifada. Less experienced troops and police may also be affected. The crisis stage of transition can cause chaos even in a stable environment, like that of the UK Parliament in winter 1997. This stage usually occurs about 6 months after the initial trauma--i.e., anytime within the next month for the Intifada transition.

In highly stressed and traumatized communities this could be a psychological time-bomb with highly unpredictable consequences that no-one can control. Use of force is like spraying water on a petrol fire. This scenario could be very important to your immediate options and strategies for stabilising the current situation.

2. Forecasting Psychological Climate and Change

My work suggests that basic human responses to trauma, stress, or change are likely to apply in political organisations and communities in most countries--though the responses will vary according to local cultural, economic and historic contexts. If so, it should be possible to monitor and forecast likely stages of change, the well-being of individuals, and the psychological climate in organisations for up to one year ahead.

I have just published the methods I use for tracking and forecasting psychological climate on my website so that analysts in different countries can test this approach for themselves.

In three new studies, I have used these methods to track potential transitions for your new Government and communities in Israel and the US Presidential transition plus their implications for the UK Government.

If my forecasts apply to current conditions in Israel and the USA, they may have important implications for managing transition periods in both countries.

You have many factors to consider as head-of-state. But these forecasts suggest psychological hazards and opportunities that other forecasting methods may not suggest. If these hazards and opportunities are valid, then transition and stress management principles may indicate different types or timing of political and military options. I can only indicate general examples. Your analysts will be far more qualified to develop specific options appropriate to local conditions.

3. Transition Management and Strategic Options

The forecasts suggest that you, President Bush, and Prime Minister Blair have strategic options for internal stability in each of your governments and for mutual support through current transitions in 2001.

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These may require choices between traditional political or military approaches to establish power and control and alternatives based on managing the psychological effects of trauma, stress, and change to maintain peace and stability.

In periods of transition crisis--forecasted for the next 4-5 months in Israel and the USA--short-term priority may need to be given to stabilising conditions by reducing tension and creating conditions for early psychological recovery. If this is done, it offers the prospect of much more favourable conditions in government and communities later in the year.

Successful transitions, even from traumatic causes, can eventually lead to major changes in attitudes and open the way to a new era--provided there is sufficient economic security and emotional support during the crisis period. Those people who adapt successfully to trauma and change can be the growing points in society.

One of the essential conditions that enabled progress in the peace process in Northern Ireland was massive financial aid from the European Union. This aid restored economic security for many communities. By contrast, lack of economic aid after the Balkans war has left many proximal communities in a highly volatile extended crisis--exploited by criminal organisations and political violence.

4. The Power or Peace Project

The basis for these forecasts, my three studies, and transition management Issues including conditions for recovery are explained in my current project.

----Power or peace? Trauma, change and psychological climate in national and international affairs - 2001---Internet preview at: <http://www.ecoslifework.co.uk/pop1.htm>

5. My Position

I have no political affiliation. My professional interest is in the smooth operation of work organisations including democratic political processes. I am also concerned to avert or minimise distress in communities that experience traumas from community conflict, war, or natural disasters.

I do not know the detailed political agendas of parties in Israel or the USA, though I am aware of key events likely to affect the psychological climate in broad groups. However, I hope that this kind of forecasting can be adapted by local experts in conjunction with other methods to anticipate and monitor periods of change and to develop timely change management options.

I recognise the realities of military power and security. But in community conflicts, I am interested in seeking alternatives to violence while trying to respect all faiths and traditions. My notes are written with military as well as political and organisational analysts in mind.

Some of my observations are critical of recent events in Israel and in many other countries. But I cannot change the past, and blame is unhelpful. We do have choices about how we let the past affect our actions now and in the future. And the future contains opportunities that many people would not think possible--especially in times of change when grief can turn to inspiration.

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I hope some of these suggestions may help your mission to establish a stable administration, restore peace, and build a happier future for all communities in Israel.

Yours in concern for peace,

(See Abu-Nimer, M. (2000). Peace building in postsettlement: Challenges for Israeli and Palestinian peace educators. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 6, 1-21; Gaerling, T., Kristensen, H., Backenroth-Ohsako, G., Ekehammar, B., & Wessells, M.G. (2000). Diplomacy and psychology: Psychological contributions to international negotiations, conflict prevention, and world peace. *International Journal of Psychology*, 35, 81-86; Post, J.M. (1999). The psychopolitics of hatred: Commentary on Ervin Staub's article. *Peace and Conflict Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5, 337-344; Staub, E. (1999). The origins and prevention of genocide, mass killing, and other collective violence. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5, 303-336; Williams, D. Human responses to change. EOS Life-Work. <http://www.eoslifework.co.uk>; Williams, D. Parliament in transition. EOS Life-Work. <http://www.eoslifework.co.uk>.) (Keywords: Dai Williams, Israel, Mideast, Peace, Sharon.)