

Israeli TV catches Olmert "coaching" Italy's Prodi

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By Dan Williams

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Israeli pundits make much of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's powers of persuasion, but this was one bit of proof that he might well have wanted to do without.

An Israeli television station broadcast candid footage on Thursday that appeared to show Olmert, during his first official visit to Rome, coaching Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi on what to say during their joint press conference.

"It is important that you emphasize the three principles of the Quartet -- that they are not negotiated (sic). They are the basis for everything," Olmert says, referring to Western demands that Hamas Islamists who run the Palestinian government soften their views before peace talks with Israel can begin.

"Please say this?" Olmert asks his nodding counterpart in English.

As it happened, Prodi did deliver words to that effect. He further endorsed Israel's vision of remaining a Jewish state -- code for ruling out an influx of Palestinian refugees. This, Channel 10 television suggested, was also at Olmert's prodding.

"You said something about a Jewish state (in the past). I know that," Olmert is shown telling Prodi as the two confer in what looks like a lounge in an Italian government complex.

While allies coordinating their rhetoric is nothing new in international diplomacy, the unvarnished glimpse into Olmert's back-room lobbying may prove a fresh embarrassment at home.

Before Rome, Olmert was in Berlin. That visit was marked by Israeli furor at a German television interview in which he seemed to confirm, in a reversal of a decades-old secrecy policy, that Israel has the Middle East's only nuclear weapons.

An Olmert spokeswoman insisted he had not abandoned Israel's "ambiguity" over its assumed arsenal, but that did not stop opposition lawmakers of various political stripes from calling for his resignation.

Olmert, a former lawyer and career politician, cuts a suave figure that is dramatically different to that of his predecessor, Ariel Sharon. An ex-general, Sharon was famous -- to his foes, notorious -- for often preferring action over talk.

The inconclusive war against Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas, an intractable Palestinian revolt, and arch-foe Iran's nuclear programme have stirred resentment among many Israelis at Olmert's style, if opinion polls are anything to judge by.

Olmert and Prodi aides had no immediate comment on the Channel 10 footage.

(Additional reporting by Robin Pomeroy in Rome)