

Israel After Ariel Sharon

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Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's second stroke in early January 2006 interrupted his strategy of unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians, leaving his new political party—Kadima ("Forward")—without its charismatic leader. More than this, the abrupt shift in leadership portends increased instability in Israel itself, the emerging Palestinian state, and the region.

Sharon, the son of Russian immigrants, built his military credentials in Israel's wars against Arab states, developing a reputation for courageous tactics and even borderline insubordination. He later helped form the Likud Party, which became known for its forceful, often militaristic, stance on matters concerning foreign policy and especially Palestinian terrorism.

When elected prime minister in February 2001, Sharon won under the banner of taking the fight to the terrorists. The previous summer at Camp David under President Bill Clinton, then-prime minister Ehud Barak offered generous land concessions in exchange for a cessation of Palestinian hostilities. Yasser Arafat rejected the offer, and his Palestinian Authority and associated factions waged a brutal terror campaign, killing over a thousand Israelis. (*The Washington Post's* Charles Krauthammer notes that "given Israel's tiny size, the American equivalent would be 50,000 dead.") Sharon's response to this *intifada* was to re-occupy Palestinian communities that Arafat had turned into terrorist bases. During his first two years in office, Sharon continued to respond to Palestinian attacks by bombing Palestinian territories and beginning the construction of the West Bank barrier.

For several decades, Israeli politicians have focused on essentially two options. The left, with leaders like Shimon Peres, has favored negotiating with the Palestinians through "land for peace" deals. This was tried in the 1993 Oslo peace accords, as well as the 2000 Camp David accords, both of which turned out to be disastrous for Israel. The right, with leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu, has argued that the Palestinians do not want peace, and absent a peace partner, the only course is to remain in the occupied territories and attempt to integrate them into Israel. Detractors point out that areas such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip are predominately Palestinian in makeup (83% vs. 17% Israeli in the West Bank; 99+% Palestinian in the Gaza Strip), so defending Israelis in them indefinitely would be ultimately untenable.

Sharon devised a third way. Even with an active offensive and defensive military strategy in place, Israel could not endure the ongoing terrorism campaign. He believed that the best response to the ongoing *intifada* should have two parts: targeted killings of terrorist leaders and the formation of a territorial settlement that would—presumably—remove the Palestinian incentive for war. Since there is no authoritative voice for all Palestinians—their prime minister cannot realistically speak for all of the militant factions—normal negotiation is not feasible. Thus, Sharon's strategy was to impose a settlement on the Palestinians by unilaterally withdrawing Israelis behind defensible borders, and letting the Palestinians work out their own future apart from Israel. This angered elements on the right and the left—the right, because it involved giving up land won in previous wars; and the left, because it was done "unilaterally" and without negotiation—but the results of this disengagement speak for themselves. Charles Krauthammer explains:

The success of this fence-plus-unilateral-withdrawal strategy is easily seen in the collapse of the intifada. Palestinian terror attacks are down 90 percent. Israel's economy has revived. In 2005 it grew at the fastest rate in the entire West. Tourists are back and the country has regained its confidence. The Sharon idea of a smaller but secure and demographically Jewish Israel garnered broad public support, marginalized the old parties of the left and right, and was on the verge of electoral success that would establish a new political center to carry on this strategy. ("Who Will Finish Sharon's Mission?" *Townhall.com*, January 6, 2006.)

In the midst of this momentum, though, Sharon was cut out of the political picture. Israel's political system will be in disarray for some time since it lacks a similarly recognized leader who can continue this centrist course. While Sharon's Kadima party will likely carry on, and perhaps even do well in the March elections, it will not garner the degree of popularity or backing it would have had with Sharon at its head. While Israel sorts out its politics and direction, any progress in the policy of disengagement is doubtful in the near term. As that process stretches out, it increases the likelihood of renewed Palestinian terrorism in those areas where Israel is less defensible.

As this happens in and around Israel, Iran—another of Israel's historic foes—is seizing the opportunity to further its own ends. Iran's new President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—now famous for denying the Holocaust, threatening to "wipe Israel off the map," and appearing to be driven by a "divine mission" to prepare the way for the Mahdi (Islam's messiah)—knows that Israel's leadership is in flux. He seems to be distancing himself from Israel to regain Arab recognition, as Iran was involved in arms transactions with both Israel and the United States (the Iran-Contra affair) during the 1980s' war with Iraq, giving Iran a reputation of being a "compromiser" in Arab eyes. At the same time, Ahmadinejad may be baiting Israel and/or the U.S. into a confrontation. If he speaks brashly and is deferred to, he gains respect from his Arab neighbors. If the "Zionist entity" or its cohort, "the great Satan," attacks him, Iran will re-emerge as the center of revolutionary Islamism—a place it held in the 1970s and desires to fill again.

Thus, in between Palestinian militant groups and a resurgent Iran, both interested in Israel's destruction, Israel finds itself with a fledgling political party and no successor the equal of Sharon—as Krauthammer puts it, "he left no Joshua." We can expect this to be a chaotic year in the Middle East.