



SHARON AND ISRAEL'S FUTURE

by Harvey Sicherman

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The stroke that felled Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on January 4, 2006, deprived Israel of its dominant political leader on the eve of critical elections. For President Bush, the loss of Sharon is compounded by the growing chaos among the Palestinians, themselves about to vote on a new legislative council. Nonetheless, for Israel at least, future policies are likely to reflect what Sharon himself, and Rabin before him, had articulated—namely, that the safety of the Jewish State requires a territorial division of the Land of Israel.

SHARON'S GENERATION

Sharon belonged to the "youngsters" of 1948, those who fought successfully against seemingly overwhelming odds to establish the State of Israel. A scion of a farming family, the future Prime Minister liked to describe himself as a simple peasant called to defend his country. In fact, he was a daring soldier and sophisticated politician. Like Yitzhak Rabin, he saw the world through the eyes of an infantryman, familiar with every inch of the Land of Israel. And, like Shimon Peres and most of his generation, he was a "Mapainik," brought up in the beliefs championed by David Ben Gurion, a nationalist, a state builder, acutely aware of Israel's hostile neighbors, prepared to hold as much of the Land of Israel as possible but also ready to accept partition with an Arab state if that was the price to pay for a secure Jewish sovereignty.

Sharon joined the nascent Israeli army in his teens and suffered a severe wound in the War of Independence. A kind of Israeli Patton, controversies dogged his exploits as a commando in the early fifties, the 1956 Sinai Campaign, and the 1967 Six Day War. Subsequently, as Commander of Israel's southern front (1969-1971), Sharon extinguished an early intifada in Gaza, using methods he would repeat thirty years later. After retiring in 1972, he was recalled to active duty during the desperate October 1973 Yom Kippur War. Sharon's most glorious hour came when he crossed the Suez Canal, nearly trapping an Egyptian army, but his tactics angered some American diplomats anxious to obtain a cease-fire. This would not be his last run-in with Washington.

Sharon had earned a law degree in the early sixties but wanted a political career. He was unwelcome in the ruling Labour party, then on the decline, and instead helped to organize the Likud coalition which, under Menachem Begin, defeated Labour in 1977. Joining the new government as Minister of Agriculture, Sharon greatly expanded Jewish settlements in the areas seized by Israel in 1967. This, in his view, was the only way to secure the entire Land of Israel against a potential Palestinian state.

Sharon's nickname, the "Bulldozer," dates from this time. Even as Begin conducted the negotiations with Sadat that, with American assistance, would produce the Camp David Accords, Sharon attracted embarrassing attention to his settlement construction. The diplomats talked; his bulldozers acted. Tellingly, however, when the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty called for the removal of the Israeli town of Yamit in northern Sinai, Sharon bulldozed it, too.

LEBANON: TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY

Begin won re-election in June 1981, and appointed Sharon Defense Minister. Perhaps, influenced by his 1973 experience, he was not notably friendly to Israel's necessary American ally, even one so supportive as the Reagan Administration. Reagan called Israel a strategic ally in the struggle against the Soviet Union, and left it to another former general, his first Secretary of State Alexander Haig, to flesh it out. It was not easy going; as Haig, a former NATO commander once put it, Sharon wanted "NATO plus" when it came to U.S. arms, and "we'll let you know after it happens" when it came to political cooperation.

The rockiest relationship, however, developed over Lebanon, a country virtually dismembered by Arafat's control of the south, a ferocious civil war, and Syrian occupation reluctantly accepted by Israel and the United States. Only a tenuous American-sponsored cease-fire prevented all-out Israeli-PLO combat.

Sharon and Begin had a big idea about Lebanon. If the cease-fire were violated, then the army of Israel would destroy the PLO and defeat the Syrians. This would achieve several vital objectives: a friendly Christian government in Beirut; the destruction of the PLO enabling Israel to impose limited autonomy on the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank; and the expulsion of Syria from Lebanon, also harming Soviet prestige in the process. But the Israeli Cabinet itself refused to endorse such a plan, and, despite claims to the contrary, neither did Haig. He, and Reagan, were prepared to let Israel defend itself against PLO attacks but not to remake the map at such great risk.

When Israel invaded Lebanon over the near assassination of its Ambassador to Britain in June 1982, Begin advertised the operation as a 30-kilometer advance to end the threat of PLO artillery bombarding northern Israel. But this was not what

happened. The Israeli army raced to Beirut while Israeli air and armor inflicted heavy losses on the Syrians. And then the Christian militia, who had secretly agreed to seize the capital, refused to do so, betraying Sharon. Israel was trapped, unwilling either to let Arafat and the PLO to escape or to urban warfare to conquer the city.

It got worse. Beset by protest and turmoil at home, the Begin Government also suffered a severe loss of support in Washington. Reagan was alarmed and confused, his Administration divided. Those in the Pentagon and the White House, who, mindful of Saudi influence, wanted to punish Israel, overcame Haig (who resigned) and others who sought to secure the withdrawal of all foreign forces in the wake of the PLO and Syrian defeat. Then the U.S.-led multinational force, originally intended to assure such a withdrawal, was promptly removed after Arafat left for Tunisian exile. President-elect Bashar Gemayel was blown up by the Syrians and his militia revenged themselves on the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps while the Israeli army stood by. Belatedly, American and French forces returned to Beirut.

The Lebanon operation, begun in triumph, had ended in tragedy. Begin soon left politics and spent his remaining years in mournful solitude. An Israeli investigating commission saddled Sharon with indirect responsibility for failing to prevent the massacres, compelling his resignation. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz's intensive effort to restore Lebanese independence in 1983 came to naught and the destruction of the Marine barracks in Beirut, followed by the withdrawal of U.S. forces in early 1984, consigned that country to Syrian domination for the next generation. America's reputation suffered a severe blow throughout the region.

ECLIPSE AND RESURRECTION

Sharon had catapulted Israel into a huge strategic gamble that divided the country, alienated Washington, and lacked "Plan B," a back-up in the event "Plan A" failed. He was now an isolated, humiliated figure, supported by a small rump of the Likud faction, hated by many Israelis for the hundreds of combat deaths and an international pariah. It would have broken a lesser man.

Instead, Sharon brooded and plotted. He also remained combative. He won a lawsuit against *Time Magazine* for its description of his role in the Lebanon war. He championed the settler constituency as his legacy.

Despite his narrow political base, Sharon also amassed considerable government experience, serving as Minister of Industry and Trade (a Free Trade Agreement with the United States), then later as Minister of Immigrant Absorption (Soviet Jewish immigration). Shedding some of his earlier bombast, Sharon cultivated a cheerful personality and an almost unIsraeli politesse in a rough and tumble society where gruffness was often a political asset. An infamous overeater, Sharon could still move his massive bulk with amazing alacrity and endless energy. He was always available to brief visiting dignitaries with maps and flyovers, even for the then obscure Governor of Texas, George W. Bush.

The 1993 Oslo Accords aroused in Sharon vitriolic opposition. After Rabin's murder and the return of the Likud to power in 1996 under Benjamin Netanyahu, Sharon regained office, this time under the concocted title of Minister of Infrastructure. Once more the settlements were the beneficiaries. And then after the violence of the Jerusalem tunnel incident in 1996, an embattled Netanyahu made him Foreign Minister. In this capacity, Sharon helped to negotiate the Wye Plantation Accord, the last significant Israeli-Palestinian agreement. There, under President Clinton's auspices, he met Arafat for the first time. Rabin had shaken Arafat's hand reluctantly but Sharon refused to do so.

Oslo and Wye reinforced Sharon's long-held views about the Palestinian Arabs, as he often called them. The plain people, in his view, had been betrayed by corrupt and evil leaders intent on annihilating Israel. They, and the other Arabs, could not accept the rights of the Jews to the Holy Land; it was no use pretending otherwise. But an elaborated cease-fire on terms necessary to Israel's security might be arranged.

Sharon's ideas on a Palestinian state evolved. He advocated Labour's Jordan option, even after Labour abandoned it, calling Jordan the "Palestinian State." But in the Gulf War of 1991, when King Hussein eluded an alliance with Saddam Hussein, Sharon suddenly saw the Monarchy's virtue and by the end of his career, he called it "a force for stability." What followed logically for him was a Palestinian "partner" for a "long-term" interim agreement. Not a final peace, but better than war.

Out of office again after Netanyahu's defeat by Ehud Barak, Sharon developed contacts with Arafat on this scheme, even earning favorable mention by Abu Ala, then Arafat's chief diplomatic agent.

As late as 1999, no one, including Sharon himself, would have predicted that he might become Prime Minister. He seemed too old and too controversial. But resurrection came swiftly and well-nigh miraculously. Compared to Netanyahu, Sharon appeared an experienced statesman. After Barak's dangerous risk running at Camp David in the summer of 2000, Sharon looked like a winning alternative. And then Arafat himself helped. On September 28, 2000, Sharon visited the Temple Mount, hoping to embarrass Barak, who had talked of dividing the Old City, and to defy Arafat, who had been denying the Temple's existence. Arafat turned the Palestinian protest of this act into a full-fledged war with attacks on Israeli civilians the main tactic. Israel now needed not only a sober statesman but a very tough general. In January 2000, the 72-year old Sharon trounced Barak to become Prime Minister at last.

THE NEW SHARON WAGES WAR

Sharon's election was viewed with consternation. Easily caricatured in Washington and elsewhere, old Middle East hands retold his Lebanon misdeeds. Arab capitals resounded with denunciation of the "butcher."

Yasser Arafat, however, saw an opportunity. The Palestinian leader believed he could isolate his old foe, provoke him into unwise military action and then, drawing on international pressure, extract what he wanted from a beleaguered and demoralized Israel.

Sharon once remarked about Arafat, "I know him and he knows me." But it turned out that neither Arafat nor the old Middle East hands knew the "new" Sharon. He had learned from his mistakes. He would not wage war alone at home or abroad. The new Prime Minister promptly formed a National Unity Government, luring his old friend, Nobel Peace Prize

winner and Oslo supporter, Shimon Peres (and Labour), to his side. In Washington, the new President, George W. Bush, had been warned about Arafat's perfidy by Bill Clinton and he gave Sharon the benefit of the doubt.

The old general pressed tactics from the Gaza days, his objective to kill the terror leaders and to isolate Arafat. Then came 9/11 and Arafat's biggest blunders. Convinced of the centrality of the Palestinian cause to world peace, and therefore his own centrality as a world leader, the Palestinian could not let go of his strategy. Somehow Sharon had to be made to overreach; then Washington would be compelled to rescue the Palestinians. But it was Arafat who overreached by lying to Bush over the Karine A arms ship and then stimulating a terror campaign. In March 2002, after the Park Hotel suicide bombing, Sharon invaded the Palestinian cities vacated a half-dozen years earlier. There arose the legend of the Jenin massacre, a Palestinian propaganda replay of Sabra and Shatila that turned out to be false. More importantly, Secretary of State Powell's mission only brought more demands on Arafat rather than Sharon's head, visibly angering the increasingly isolated Palestinian leader.

Sharon proved less successful in avoiding the U.S.-led diplomatic confection called the "Road Map." He liked Bush's insistence on a Palestinian leadership "untainted by terrorism" but cared much less for a "settlement freeze," whatever that meant. So Sharon approved the Road Map with numerous reservations and detours.

THE NEWER SHARON WAGES PEACE

These developments sealed Arafat's fate. After 3,000 Palestinians dead, countless wounded, and deepening impoverishment, the war looked like a loser for which the Palestinians had sacrificed their international political support. But a war of attrition attrits. A thousand Israelis, mostly civilians, had been killed. And Sharon's political success in discrediting Arafat as a partner carried an unwelcome political consequence. Was Israel to remain mired forever at the mercy of the nonexistent partner?

Amid internal rivalries, Labour left the National Unity Coalition in the fall of 2002, but in the January 2003 elections, Sharon trounced its candidate Amram Mitzna, deriding his ideas on unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and other areas. By the end of that year, however, Sharon had become convinced that doing nothing beyond the war of attrition would rapidly erode his leadership. The Israeli economy had been badly hurt. Moreover, a prolonged violent stalemate promised international pressure, a taste of which he received when a group of his opponents organized the so-called Geneva Initiative between prominent Israelis and some leading Palestinian politicians. His ally in Washington was deeply mired in Iraq. Other dangers, such as a nuclear Iran, were looming on the horizon.

The war was shifting its shape and Sharon would shift to meet it. If there were no Palestinian partner for his interim agreements, then there might still be an international partner, especially in Washington, and domestic partners, especially in Labour, for a demarcation of the borders that would also curtail the intifada. In practical terms, that meant fences, walls, and roadblocks that, combined with continuing offensive action, sharply reduced suicide bombing. It also meant a focus on Sharon's old theater of operations, Gaza. The 8,500 Jews planted there with Sharon's earlier encouragement were subjected to a substantial portion of the Palestinian attacks. One stroke—withdrawal from Gaza—would free three Israeli brigades, rid Israel of 1.4 million Palestinians, and force Arafat to assert his authority over Hamas or discredit the Palestinian case for statehood.

Sharon revealed this scheme, which he called "disengagement," in early 2004, sounding like Labour in his justifications. On April 14, he secured American support; in return, Bush wrote a letter assuring Israel that it was no longer practical to return to the 1967 lines. But this was not enough to overcome the uproar provoked by Sharon's abrupt change. He seriously underestimated resistance in the Likud and the anger of his former supporters to this sudden change, especially among the messianics of religious Zionism. Sharon, however, was never better than under fire and he "bulldozed" once more. Calmly riding the panic on December 1, when the government could muster but forty votes, he cowed the Likud Central Committee eight days later into a new coalition with Labour and a small religious party rather than face elections.

But was disengagement still necessary? Arafat died unexpectedly on November 11, 2004. He had strongly opposed Sharon's move, understanding correctly that it discarded him diplomatically while threatening him with civil war. When Abu Mazen, a vocal critic of Arafat's strategy was elected January 2005 to succeed him, Sharon came under new domestic and international pressure to turn disengagement into reengagement with the new leader.

As it turned out, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was hardly unilateral. Very late in the game, Sharon engaged the Egyptians to take over the border, allowing forces there previously prohibited by the Peace Treaty; he permitted the European Union to post monitors at the crossing; and allowed the Palestinian Authority and an international consortium special arrangements over the Israeli hothouse industry in the doomed settlements.

And then the bulldozer moved on August 15, 2005. The evacuation from Gaza and three small settlements in the northern West Bank was attended by much anguish, some turmoil, and a little violence. It went far faster and more easily than anticipated. Sharon had dared what Rabin had feared to do, namely, run the risk of civil war by uprooting settlements in the absence of a final agreement. And now it was the Palestinians' turn. As he said on evacuation day: "the Palestinians bear the burden of proof. They must fight terror organizations, dismantle its infrastructure and show sincere intention of peace in order to sit with us at the negotiating table."

Abu Mazen flinched. Instead, he obtained from Washington yet another extension on the showdown with Hamas and others until after the Palestinian Legislative Council elections scheduled for late January 2006. But the Americans, although deeply involved in the post-Gaza arrangements, were already shifting focus. Beset by the war in Iraq and rapidly declining political capital, Bush signaled that a Palestinian state might be long in coming, longer than the President's second term.

Meanwhile, the international accolades for Sharon flowed fast. He was lionized at the U.N. and celebrated for his courage. The old warrior was not deluded. Sharon told Bush he had lost the Likud majority.

Buoyed by the polls that located him in a rising curve among the Israeli electorate, Sharon had already leaked a story that he might form a new party. Unable to complete his address on September 25, 2005, to a hostile Likud conference, the Prime Minister's attempt to name allies to his government was sabotaged by Likud rebels in the Knesset on November 8. Then, on

November 10, came the critical blow, when Shimon Peres was ousted as Labour leader by the former Histadrut leader Amir Peretz, who promptly announced Labour's departure from the coalition.

Once more Sharon took the offensive. Eleven days later, he announced his departure from Likud. A third of the party came with him. Shimon Peres, humiliated by Peretz, also joined the new group, named Kadima ("forward"). After Netanyahu successfully gained control of Likud, Sharon had positioned himself perfectly: the man more intelligent and realistic than either the ideologue to his right or the naif to his left.

Sharon, at age 77, was now poised to bulldoze away the Israeli party structure that had frustrated a generation of those who saw neither left nor right as the safe path. An increasingly patriarchal figure, he had risen above conventional politics. Then came the warning stroke on December 18, 2005. Apparently recovered, Sharon resumed work. He was reported to be unusually irritable, undoubtedly annoyed by the untimely knock of mortality. Not five weeks after the founding of Kadima, its founder was felled again. This time there could be no backup plan.

SHARON AND THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL

Sharon leaves a gaping hole in Israeli politics. At the end, the "farmer-general" from 1948 offered a Rabin-like blend of military toughness and diplomatic agility, reinforced by his solid if not warm relationship with George W. Bush.

Unlike Rabin or any other politician of his time, however, Sharon boldly manipulated Israeli politics and Israeli politicians. These, like the settlements he planted and those he uprooted, were instruments to achieve objectives. They could be deployed or redeployed, as necessary, notwithstanding the pain.

Despite his reputation for ruthlessness, Sharon was no stranger to personal suffering. A firearms accident in 1967 claimed a son. A first wife was killed in an automobile accident; his beloved second wife Lilly died of cancer in 2000, unable to share his triumph. At the end of his career, another son Omri, who was his agent in politics and business, got caught in a political scandal that touched Sharon himself.

It was said of Sharon that he kept his cards so close to his chest even he could not always see them. But the former general was not a shameless chameleon who merely changed with the crisis *du jour*. His secrets were disguised in plain sight. A proud Jew, his identity derived from a Zionism that was sometimes mystical, sometimes biblical, sometimes historical but always informed by confidence in the unique destiny of the Jewish people in their land. The task therefore was to secure as much of the country as possible for as many Jews as possible, bounded by prudence, including demographic prudence, and necessary international alliances. Sharon had grown less impetuous with age and wisdom but once conditions were right, no less imperious in pursuing these objectives.

Although Sharon often said that Israel's war for independence had never ended, and might not ever end, he had seen in his own time Israel's astonishing growth. He would have used military strength, political initiative, and the American alliance to imprint on a permanent Israeli map the three settlement blocs, an Israeli-controlled Old City of Jerusalem, the Jordan River security zone, limitations on Palestinian sovereignty, and no Palestinian right of return.

Sharon had come to embody the hopes and views of most Israelis. He, like they, had hoped that after 1967, the Land of Israel would never be partitioned again. No one had worked harder to avoid it. But the safety of the Jewish State now demanded it and from that task Sharon would never shrink.

Other politicians will maneuver for Sharon's mantle and they will have to meet his standard. On December 7, 2005, commemorating David Ben Gurion, Sharon surely had himself in mind when he said that "the public's trust is given to a leader in order to lead, determine clear goals and make difficult decisions." That would be Sharon's ultimate legacy.

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