

How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny

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Brief Analysis

Two Washington Institute fellows join the children of former Israeli prime ministers to discuss how their legacy of leadership informs the country's biggest looming challenge: maintaining the possibility of separation from the Palestinians.



*On September 5, Washington Institute senior fellows Dennis Ross and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum to mark the release of their new book **Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important***

Leaders Shaped Its Destiny (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its>). *They were joined by the children of two of the leaders featured in the book: Dalia Rabin, the chair of the Yitzhak Rabin Center, and Gilad Sharon, a columnist for Yediot Aharonot. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The impetus behind this book was the fateful choice Israel will soon need to make—a choice that should be informed by the journey of past Israeli leaders who met the bar of history. How did they make these historic decisions, and what made these leaders great?

For David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, the central mission was to end Jewish homelessness after 2,000 years. He never deviated from that objective. He believed immigration was the oxygen of Zionism because Jews were a minority in Palestine at the time. In order to create a democratic Jewish homeland, more immigration was needed.

Another characteristic of Ben-Gurion's leadership was his sense of how world events would affect Zionism. He was often prescient about such matters; in 1945, he was convinced that war was coming with the Arab states even though few others agreed. Interestingly, he also feared that the United States would attack Israel, an indication of how far the relationship has come today.

Ben-Gurion was not afraid of making momentous choices for the good of the country, even when they incurred risks. He made the controversial decision to accept German reparations when the fledgling country was in bad shape economically. Most important, he declared statehood in 1948 against all odds, using his analytical framework to determine that the decision had to be made right then.

For Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the driving imperative was to end Jewish victimhood. He also believed strongly in the need for equilibrium between values and interests. For instance, he thought it was wrong to impose martial law in Arab communities since their residents were Israeli citizens. At Camp David, he set the template for future leaders who would accept the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. Begin believed that national unity was all-important and should not overwhelm the justice of the cause. For these reasons—and the fact that the peace treaty he reached with Egypt has endured numerous challenges—his legacy remains vital today.

DALIA RABIN

Yitzhak Rabin had a unique brand of leadership. He spent most of his adult life in the army and was affected by the 1948 war, which convinced him of the need to form a strong Israel Defense Forces. He was also a deeply modest leader, never taking credit but always taking responsibility.

As IDF chief of staff after the 1967 war, he wrote that Israel needed to transform the fruits of that victory into peace, knowing territorial concessions would be involved. He was not a hawk that turned into a dove overnight; he had been seeking peace ever since he witnessed the terrible price of war and left the army. In addition to building infrastructure for peace in the region, he was also the architect of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

GILAD SHARON

From a young age, Ariel Sharon made it his mission to guard the lives of Jews by making Israel strong. During his long military career, he set the standard of not returning home until the mission was executed, never leaving men behind, and performing at the highest level. In particular, he played a key role in attacking the Egyptian stronghold in the Sinai Peninsula during the 1967 war.

His strategic thinking was again at play when he was elected prime minister and faced high levels of Palestinian terrorism. To counter the second intifada, he led Operation Defensive Shield, which completely changed the

situation on the ground by reflecting his belief in achieving decisive knockouts.

Elsewhere, he saw the relationship with the United States as Israel's most important asset in the international community, and one based on shared values. He also emphasized the importance of bringing Jews to Israel and creating a strong connection with the diaspora. Moreover, he knew Israel's neighbors very well and prioritized the country's right to defend itself. In short, whenever he saw a problematic reality, he set a goal and changed that reality.

DENNIS ROSS

The four leaders profiled in *Be Strong and of Good Courage* disagreed ideologically, but the way they defined the role of leader was very similar. In their view, making tough decisions was their responsibility even if these choices were politically costly. They understood the cost of action, but also the cost of inaction. Sharon spoke about the solitude of the leader, referring to the way in which this intense burden of decisionmaking fell solely on the leader's shoulders. Rabin likewise took responsibility for his decisions, no matter the outcome. Both men were also superbly analytical, honest with themselves, and willing to hear bad news.

Perhaps most important, these leaders knew the importance of maintaining Israel's identity as a democratic Jewish state. If the country stays on its current path, it will become "one state for two peoples" by default. Yet this looming reality is not at the forefront of Israel's national debate because it is not an immediate threat in the same way as Hezbollah rockets or Iranian entrenchment in Syria.

The new book is largely aimed at those who deny or ignore this demographic situation. One statistic makes clear the extent of the problem. In 1986, the ratio of Jews to Arabs in Israel and the occupied territories was 63 percent to 37 percent. Today, even after the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews and Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, the ratio is 61 percent to 39 percent. These numbers indicate that Israel is fast becoming one state for two peoples—a situation that could make the international "Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions" challenge seem like child's play if the Palestinians seize on the full electoral implications of this demographic trend.

To be sure, no two-state solution will be available anytime soon. Palestinians are totally divided, and succession is looming in the West Bank. Even so, it is important to preserve the option of separation in the future.

Among other things, this means Israel must stop settlement construction outside the West Bank security barrier. Around 85 percent of Israeli settlers live in large blocs **located within or near the barrier** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions>)—areas that constitute around 8 percent of the West Bank. Yet the number of Israelis living in disparate settlements spread throughout other parts of the West Bank has swelled to 104,000. If that figure continues to grow, it will inevitably reach a tipping point at which Israel loses the political option to separate from the West Bank. Obviously, the power of the settler movement will make any near-term move toward separation difficult, but that decision must nevertheless be taken.

Sharon once said that "all my successors are politicians," meaning they were only willing to make political decisions. His concern was valid; to address it, the book outlines what the United States can do to make it politically easier for Israeli leaders to start heading down the tough road of separation.

This summary was prepared by Basia Rosenbaum. ❖

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