Promised Land:

The Legacy of Ariel Sharon and the Limits of Unilateralism

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

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Articles & Testimony

Dennis Ross reviews Ariel Sharon: A Life, a new biography by Nir Hefez and Gadi Bloom.Â The review originally appeared in the Fall 2006 issue of theÂ journalÂ Democracy **(http://www.democracyjournal.org/article.php?ID=6489)** .

As Israeli journalists Nir Hefez and Gadi Bloom ask in the beginning of their new book, Ariel Sharon: A Life, will Sharon be remembered as the man who laid the basis for resolving a 150-year conflict with the Palestinians? Or will future generations think of him as the man responsible for helping to create a terrorist-governed Palestinian state, for promoting the massive construction of settlements (many of which were likely to prove unsustainable), and for generating the growth of Hezbollah in Lebanon with a misbegotten war in 1982 that also stained him -- and Israel -- with the massacres in Sabra and Shatila? Considering how this extraordinary and controversial Israeli leader strode across the history of the Middle East over the past half-century, such a question cannot be definitively answered until the future of this region is settled.

Writing in the summer of 2006, with Hamas in control of Gaza and Hezbollah having provoked a conflict that has many in the international community questioning the logic of Israel's response, one might be tempted to say that history's verdict is already in, and it is not kind to Sharon. Indeed, looking through the prism of today's events, Gaza is hardly a success story, having devolved into chaos and become a platform for attacks against Israel. Hefez and Bloom quote Sharon criticizing Shimon Peres during the first intifada in 1989 for calling for the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, declaring then that "if we leave, the terrorists will fire cannons and missiles on Sderot and Ashkelon [two Israeli cities just outside of Gaza], just as they did in Lebanon." Sharon's criticism at the time looks remarkably prescient, even though six years later he proceeded to pursue precisely the policy he had earlier criticized, and there has been rocket fire out of Gaza and into Israel ever since the withdrawal.

Similarly, Sharon's plans for the remaking of Lebanon in the 1982 war succeeded in expelling the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from that country, but at the expense of a prolonged and expensive conflict in Lebanon that fostered Hezbollah's emergence as a dominant force among Lebanese Shia. And now, in 2006, there is a danger that Hezbollah could emerge even stronger from the current war (unless, of course, it is seen as losing its

status as a state within a state). Indeed, if Hezbollah remains unconstrained, just as it was prior to the war, and is being rearmed, then it and the radical Islamists will win not only in Lebanon but probably also among the Palestinians. Hamas undoubtedly will gain from such an outcome, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government in Israel will find it hard to act on the Sharon legacy.

Sharon hardly will be vindicated if his successors are not able to act on the logic of disengagement. But should Hezbollah be contained in Lebanon and less able to act independently against the Israelis, we could see the relatively moderate, secular forces in the Middle East begin to make a comeback, and Sharon's plan for disengagement in some form may yet be salvageable. In this sense, the Sharon legacy remains, in many ways, contingent. Yet, as the history of the conflict -- told through the life of Sharon -- demonstrates, bold, unilateral moves can only take you so far. The only hope for lasting security and stability, and even peace, requires that all parties involved -- Israelis, Arabs, and the international community -- take on serious responsibilities. No single leader, even one as determined and confident in his rectitude as Sharon, can impose a solution.

Hefez and Bloom pull few punches on Sharon. The reader sees a man who is enormously self-confident; he cares little for the opinions of others, believes most Israeli political figures are small-minded and short-sighted, sees rules as inhibiting and applying to others but not himself, and is convinced that leaders must be prepared to take dramatic moves and that he alone is capable of taking the historic steps to secure Israel's future. Here is a man who manipulated his colleagues, had little regard for the costs Arabs might pay if he was acting in the service of Israeli security needs (as he defined them), and paid little heed to others in the Israeli military when they opposed what he wanted. As a young commander in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Sharon often defied his superiors, but lucky for him, he always had important protectors. First, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and, later, Yitzhak Rabin were instrumental in protecting him. Ben Gurion believed that Sharon had an "unconventional mind" and was "a brilliant soldier." Rabin, too, saw in Sharon a soldier who might cause problems with his superiors but who reflected the daring needed in a military like Israel's -- a daring he demonstrated in both the 1967 and 1973 wars.

The Hefez-Bloom description of Sharon leaves no doubt that he had extraordinary courage, inspired soldiers in battle to follow his lead, and was guided by a deep belief in doing what he considered right. The book provides a valuable portrait of Sharon's character and clearly demonstrates the personal qualities that guided his tumultuous career. However, the biography tends on occasion to present too simplistic a version of the historic moments in which Sharon played contributing or dominating roles. In this respect, one has to question the authors' decision not to interview Sharon or his family members directly for the book. As they explain, the authors deliberately did not want to be tainted by Sharon and his closest confidants, his sons. While they may have gained a level of impartiality, they also lost the benefit of using Sharon's words to illustrate his version of events. (By comparison, the deep interviews of Sharon conducted by Haaretz journalist Ari Shavit convey the nature of Sharon's own qualities as a thinker and decision-maker, with all their complications and contradictions.) Still, by recounting Sharon's behavior over time in such a readable way, Hefez and Bloom show the personalized rules and overwhelming sense of purpose that guided Sharon throughout his life.

Whether he was building the settlements or deciding to withdraw from them later on, Sharon was driven by his own view of what was right. The authors suggest that this mindset was instilled in him by his parents. On the moshav -- a cooperative community of farms -- where Sharon grew up, his mother slept with a rifle. When the decision was made to require all the members of the cooperative to give up a portion of their land to create a new village, Sharon's mother alone rejected the decision of the majority, traveling two miles in the dark to cut the wire that would have partitioned the family's land. The rules might apply to everyone else in the moshav, but not the Scheinerman's (Sharon's family name before it was Hebraized) .

Despite his parents' stubborn independence, Sharon's father, paradoxically, cared deeply about divisions among the

Jews in pre-independence Palestine, a concern later shared by his son. In my own experience with Sharon, I was often struck by his desire for national unity governments that would embody a consensus in Israel. Although his own behavior in the opposition often added to divisions in the country, in power, Sharon was very sensitive to societal divisions and sought broad agreement.

Thus the paradox Sharon inherited from his father: Though he believed unity was paramount, he never shied away from defying orders and creating waves when he believed that Israel's security was at risk. Hefez and Bloom point out that after the 1967 war Sharon vigorously pushed for the creation of settlements in the newly-occupied territories, believing that facts on the ground would force otherwise weak political leaders to hang firm in the face of international pressure. On this point, he was sharply at odds with Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, whose equivocation in the run-up to the war led Sharon, according to an account cited by the authors, to recommend to the chief of the Israeli military, Rabin, that the general seize power from the prime minister and the Cabinet.

When he became the minister of agriculture in 1977, Sharon pursued the building of settlements with a vigor that meant skirting the laws in order to push expansion and construction even when unauthorized. It's at this time that Sharon earned the nickname "the bulldozer," not only because those machines were integral to settlement construction, but because he would act on what he said he would do and could not be stopped. While many apply the bulldozer imagery to his position on settlement building, it also could be applied equally to his actions to dismantle or evacuate settlements. It was Sharon who convinced Prime Minister Menachem Begin that for the sake of peace with Egypt, settlements in the Sinai would have to be dismantled, and then in 1982 carried this out while serving as minister of defense. And it was Sharon who decided to become the first prime minister in Israel to dismantle settlements in Gaza and the northern part of the West Bank without an agreement with the Palestinians and against the wishes of the ideological base of his party.

Why would he do this? Was it simply because Sharon believed it was right? And if so, what changed to make him think it was right to take down the settlements he had done so much to build and expand? His critics in Israel claim it was the legal problems Sharon was facing, problems that led his son Omri to plead guilty to illegal campaign financing. As Zvi Hendel of the rightist National Union party cynically charged, "the disengagement will go as far as the criminal investigations go." Hefez and Bloom also suggest that the timing of his decisions on disengagement were influenced by the criminal investigations. But they offer a broader political motive as well: that Sharon's whole history had made him a master of finding ways to change the political reality, and from late 2003 to early 2004, he needed to do just that, and in a radical way.

Sharon faced a reeling economy, an ongoing intifada in which he seemed to have no answers, and rumors of indictments against him on corruption charges related to illegal loans and payoffs to his other son, Gilad. His approval ratings in Israel were hovering around 30 percent when the Geneva Accords -- a "solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- were unveiled by former Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and his Palestinian partners. Sharon was bitterly critical of what these nongovernmental Israelis and their quasi-official Palestinian partners had negotiated, and the Israeli public generally shared his opposition to these proposed accords. But the polls also revealed at the time that it was not enough for Sharon merely to criticize what others were offering or proposing. He needed to offer something of his own other than simply a call to stay the course. Hefez and Bloom argue that with a new attorney general in office and indictments looming, Sharon was motivated to take action to create a situation in which a sitting prime minister could not be indicted because he was pushing a historic initiative to reverse the settler movement, an effort that the liberal media in Israel would surely embrace.

Perhaps Hefez and Bloom are right about the timing of the initiative: Sharon was facing problems on every political front. What the authors don't mention is that four former leaders of the Shin Bet -- Israel's domestic intelligence organization -- also announced during this period that the country was headed toward the abyss, and it was this

pressure that contributed to a sharp downturn in support for Sharon. The pressures were real, but Sharon always thrived on pressure. In battle, he kept his cool, seeing both the big picture and how to exploit tactical openings. Not the type to be passive in the face of an onslaught against him or his country, Sharon always was prepared to take unexpected, far-reaching steps to shape Israel's future.

At a private dinner with me in 1997, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, then the chief of staff of the IDF and hardly a fan of Sharon's, said that the one person who would surprise all of us in how far he would go for peace with the Palestinians would be Ariel Sharon. Lipkin-Shahak described Sharon as pragmatic and nonideological. Indeed, Sharon himself, in numerous private conversations with me during his tenure as foreign minister, showed remarkable openness to unconventional ideas on permanent-status negotiations. Even though he told me that he did not think Israel could do what the Palestinians wanted on the core issues, and the Palestinians could not do what the Israelis wanted, he was very interested when I gave him some examples of creative ways to address the needs of both sides. At one point, for instance, I suggested that the Palestinians could be given sovereignty over the breath of their state with the understanding that Israel would have the responsibility for providing security in certain areas. He was intrigued by the possibility of reconciling Palestinian needs for sovereignty with Israeli security requirements in such a fashion.

I cite this not because it proves that Sharon was ready for disengagement all along. Rather, I mention it to show that Sharon was likely to take a bold initiative vis-Ã -vis the Palestinians at some point. The circumstances and context would dictate the timing but not his readiness for a bold move. In this sense, the authors are probably right that his declining political fortunes -- and his own expectation that the international community, led by the United States, would pressure him to take steps not to his liking --Â motivated him to seize the initiative. And, in retrospect, Sharon's choice of a unilateral disengagement as his bold move should not have come as such a big surprise. His instinct to make Israel the master of its own fate -- and not dependent on Palestinian responsiveness, especially after nearly four years of an intifada -- made any unilateral move more likely to be appealing to him than any initiative based on agreement with the Palestinians.

Two other factors added to the appeal of a unilateral approach. First, while Hefez and Bloom argue that President George W. Bush was consistently pressuring Sharon on what amounted to tactical steps (lifting checkpoints that impeded Palestinian movement, limiting military operations into the Palestinian areas, promising not to harm or expel Yasser Arafat), the fact is that his Administration was very passive when it came to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. True, it negotiated the road map to peace with the European Union, the Russians, and the United Nations, but its real purpose was less to try to transform the conflict and more to assuage European and Arab concerns in advance of going to war in Iraq. Had the road map been a serious diplomatic initiative, the Administration would have sought to negotiate its terms and the meaning of each obligation in it with the Israelis and Palestinians -- the parties who actually had to carry it out. But that would have taken a long, tough, and grinding diplomatic process, and the Administration has eschewed such diplomacy. Given the Bush Administration's instinctive passivity, Sharon understood that if he came up with an initiative, particularly if it was unilateral and did not require any great effort at mediation, the Administration would likely embrace it.

Second, disengagement seemed to reflect an emerging consensus among Israelis. The "left" had been discredited by the Palestinian rejection of peace in 2000 and their turn to violence. The "right" had been discredited by maintaining the fallacy of permanent control of the territories. Emerging demographic realities dictated that if Israelis stayed in Gaza and the West Bank, they would become a minority controlling a majority in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River in the coming decade. As such, if Israel remained where it was, it could be Jewish or democratic, but not both.

Unilateral disengagement, then, met both tests: It did not depend on Palestinians who had been unmasked as rejecting peace, and it solved the demographic problem by withdrawing Jewish settlers from all of Gaza and, in

principle, all but the major settlement bloc areas of the West Bank. For Sharon, it responded to his needs -- political and otherwise -- and allowed him to regain the initiative both within Israel and internationally. Indeed, who in the international community was going to complain about Israel withdrawing from Arab territories?

But unilateral disengagement had its weaknesses, some of which are apparent today. Foremost among them was that it required nothing of the Palestinians; they assumed no responsibilities. Worse, because moderates like President Mahmoud Abbas could not show that their negotiations with the Israelis had produced the withdrawal, it was Hamas that took credit for forcing the Israelis to leave. Much like with the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in the year 2000, which allowed Hezbollah to claim that violence worked and negotiations did not, the Gaza disengagement ended up strengthening the wrong forces among the Palestinians.

To be sure, the fact that there were no agreed security-for-access arrangements before the Israelis withdrew helped to guarantee that life would get worse in Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal and not better. (Israel was bound to choke off commerce into and out of Gaza given the absence of any Palestinian steps -- agreed or otherwise -- to prevent terrorists from using crossing points to get into Israel. And, since Hamas and others planned attacks against the crossing points, the Israelis had even more incentive to shut them down.) So, in the end, Abbas got the worst of both worlds: As president of the Palestinian Authority, he got no credit for Israel's departure, and he was blamed for the economic problems afterward. Palestinians remained unsatisfied, and so did Israelis, who had withdrawn but got only rocket attacks into Israel for their troubles.

Sharon, for his part, left the scene before the success or failure of disengagement could have been gauged, suffering a massive stroke in early 2006 that permanently incapacitated him. At the time, he was gearing up for a reelection campaign, not as the head of the Likud Party, the right-wing party he helped construct in the 1970s, but as the leader of a newly formed centrist party, Kadima. Here again, Sharon broke the rules and the mold. He would not let Likud constrain him or his plans for the future, and he launched the new party as a result. Unfortunately, he was denied the chance to act on his plans and build his legacy.

When the dust fully settles from the war between Hezbollah and Israel and the operation against Hamas in Gaza, what will be the future of Sharon's last bold act, his unilateral disengagement policy? One thing that is clear is that the Arab narrative that occupation breeds violence looks far less credible after two Israeli withdrawals -- from Lebanon and from Gaza -- that did not end attacks into Israel proper. The bargain was supposed to be land for peace, or at least security; it was not supposed to be land for nothing or land for war. Thus, even in the best of circumstances, disengagement in the West Bank -- as originally planned by Sharon -- may be redefined to mean the disengagement or evacuation of settlers, but not soldiers. Unlike Gaza, the West Bank is close to all Israeli communities, and rocket attacks, if not prevented by Palestinian security forces, will have to be prevented by the IDF.

Yet the lesson of the past year is that Sharonian unilateralism cannot solve Israel's problems with its neighbors because it eliminates -- at least as it has been pursued -- any sense of mutuality of obligation. If there is to be peace in the region, Israel will have to be prepared to surrender land and end occupation, but it must get something for doing so. That is, Arabs also must assume responsibility, and they must be prepared to act on it.

Some may argue that the answer is for Israel, the United States, or the international community to lay out a comprehensive solution to the conflict. In other words, if only moderate Arabs saw all that they would gain in terms of resolving the conflict, they would then take on the radical Islamists and not let them subvert the hopes for peace. While this sounds good in theory, it is too bad that there is virtually no evidence of any such readiness on the part of those who declare their preparedness in the Arab world to accept peace to also assume the responsibilities that go with it. It is time for Arab leaders who say they favor peace to spell out what they are for, not only what they are against. They need to make clear what responsibilities they are prepared to assume, and that should include an

active effort to delegitimize terrorism as an instrument of policy.

With Hezbollah capturing the imagination of an Arab world that has always been attracted to those who will defy the powerful, resist imposition, and end a history of humiliation, that may seem to be a very tall order for moderate Arab regimes and their leaders. It is. However, their survival, not just peace, depend on it. The Saudis, for instance, seemed to understand this reality at the beginning of the war between Hezbollah and Israel, and that is why they criticized Hezbollah, charging them not with the hallowed virtue of "resistance" but with rash adventurism. Unfortunately, in the daily imagery of Lebanese suffering at the hands of the Israelis, that understanding of what was at stake was quickly lost. Moreover, American leadership was required from the outset to integrate Israel's military moves with an Arab political plan -- and that was lacking. Make no mistake: American leadership remains an essential ingredient for a region that is now spiraling in the wrong direction.

If the spiral is to be reversed, if peace is again to be a possibility, the very concept of responsibility must be reintroduced. Yes, the Israelis have responsibilities. Yes, the United States and the international community have responsibilities. But, as we are prepared to spell those out, we must also not give Arab leaders a pass.

Sharon had little faith in the Arabs, and that is why he favored unilateralism. However, unilateralism can provide only outcomes, not solutions. It may be that solutions are far away, but the starting point for producing them is making it clear that Arabs, in general, and Palestinians, in particular, at some point have to be responsible. Peace will not be built on slogans or entitlement, but on accountability -- and it is time for the Arabs to be assigned theirs. ❖

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