

The Danger of a Sharon Exit

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As it has become increasingly clear that Ariel Sharon will never be able to resume his duties as Israel's prime minister after suffering a massive stroke, the country has prepared to move on. But life after Sharon is not so simple, particularly as Palestinians prepare to hold elections Wednesday when Hamas, the Islamist terrorist organization, is poised to do well.

For the past two years, Sharon has been the driver of developments between Israelis and Palestinians. It was Sharon who first announced a policy of disengagement from the Palestinians. It was Sharon who then took this principle and carried out Israel's subsequent withdrawal from Gaza and the dismantling of settlements there. Finally, it was Sharon who left Likud, which he helped found, and set the stage for elections as the head of a new centrist party, Kadima.

In each case, the United States, the international community and the Palestinians have waited to respond to his initiatives and timing. In effect, Sharon created a luxury for others to be passive and reactive because he shaped reality.

For its part, the Bush administration supported his initiatives and tried to manage the consequences of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. As Sharon sought to redefine Israeli politics and govern with a new centrist consensus, the administration was again supportive and ready to respond to what it anticipated would be a new Sharon initiative after the Israeli elections.

Benefit to Palestinians

But it was not only the United States and the other members of the "Quartet" -- the European Union, the Russians

and the United Nations -- who were waiting to see what Sharon would do next; it was also the Palestinians. Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority one year ago and has initiated little on his own. Though he might not like all aspects of Sharon's unilateralism, especially its imposition of Israeli positions on Palestinians, Abbas could still point to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the likely withdrawal from a part of the West Bank as increasing Palestinian autonomy, and without the Palestinian Authority having to fulfill any obligations of its own.

To be sure, the increasing chaos among Palestinians in Gaza in the aftermath of Israel's withdrawal has damaged the Palestinian Authority, but it has not altered its behavior. Ironically, even the Palestinian public could also take some comfort in Sharon's presence. They could vent their anger toward the corruption of the Palestinian Authority by voting for Hamas in this week's legislative elections knowing that Sharon would still take far-reaching steps toward withdrawal from the West Bank. Why else would he be the first Israeli sitting prime minister to leave his party and form a new one?

The certainty of additional Israeli initiatives has been replaced by uncertainty about who will lead Israel over the next several years. Even if acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert succeeds Sharon by winning elections in March, no one should assume that he can move as ambitiously as Sharon might have. Apart from having to build his own authority, much will depend on the type of coalition he is able to put together after the Israeli elections.

The good news for Olmert is that he is Sharon's natural successor, believing deeply in disengagement from the Palestinians. Even so, the shape of the Israeli elections will be heavily influenced by what Palestinians are doing and whether relative calm prevails.

Hamas Factor

Hamas's emergence as the central power broker could strengthen the Israeli perception that there is no Palestinian partner and that the only options are further unilateral steps to disengage from Palestinians and the West Bank. But the empowerment of Hamas and a resurgence of violence would highlight the danger of disengagement and almost certainly benefit the right wing in Israel, which is opposed to further pullbacks. The difference between elections that produce a strong centrist coalition vs. a more rightist coalition is likely to be the difference between an Israel that continues to take the initiative and one that does not.

Will Palestinians do their part? Probably not, unless the United States leads an international effort to affect Palestinian behavior by emphasizing three essential points:

- First, that the international community will not deal with Hamas unless it renounces violence, gives up its weapons and commits to co-existence. (Presently, most Palestinians assume there is no cost to voting for Hamas; they need to understand that there are political and economic ramifications for empowering a terrorist organization.)
- Second, that international assistance will be immediately forthcoming for job-creating projects but will cease if

Palestinians do not immediately establish law and order in Gaza and the West Bank.

- And third, that continuing assistance to the Palestinian Authority will depend on its assumption of its real governing responsibilities, including a sustained effort to prevent acts of terror against Israel.

Hamas and the Palestinian Authority cannot have it both ways; it cannot be acceptable for Hamas to go along with law and order internally while it still tolerates and supports terrorism against Israel.

Without such a clear-cut set of conditions and unmistakable international attention, the militarization of Palestinian society will intensify, affect the Israeli elections adversely, and point the way to a grim future.

Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*, and was U.S. envoy to the region under presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush.



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