

# A Patriot's Vision

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Jan 16, 2006

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.

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Once when I was sitting with Ariel Sharon, he bemoaned Israel's current generation of political figures as "thinking only of today, while our enemies think about tomorrow." Sharon saw a world in which political expediency was a threat to Israel, and he felt that his generation--a generation that had fought to found the State of Israel--bore a special responsibility.

Sharon spoke feelingly about Yitzhak Rabin and about how they shared a special bond, understanding what Israel's interests required. They had their differences, to be sure, but neither man shied away from bold decisions, and neither was bound by normal political constraints. Neither feared the hard demands of history.

As prime minister, Sharon saw his role in precisely those terms. He would act to define Israel's borders and safeguard its future, regardless of whether Palestinians were up to the task of being a partner. Sharon decided to part ways with Likud, the party he helped to found, precisely because he would not let Likud and its settler base prevent him from taking historic decisions.

He understood the demographic realities that required Israel to withdraw from Gaza and most of the West Bank if Israel was to remain Jewish and democratic. He knew only too well the sacrifice it would take to remove large numbers of settlements in the territories that he had helped build. But he had the personal credibility to ask those he saw as latter-day Zionist pioneers to give up their homes for the sake of the State of Israel and its future.

In withdrawing from Gaza and forming a new party as a sitting prime minister, Sharon created a special place for himself, becoming the nation's undisputed leader, leaving all others to appear as mere politicians. Recent polls have shown that his new party, Kadima, would more than double the number of seats of its closest rival, Labor. And Likud, the party he left, would fall from its dominant position to being a distant third, polls have indicated.

But elections are set for March 28, not now, and Kadima at this point is more an extension of Sharon than it is a real party. Besides lacking a grass-roots base and a developed organization, it does not yet have a clear platform or even a slate of candidates.

Certainly, if Sharon survives and is capable of anointing a successor, that may provide some ballast for Kadima and direction for the country. But even if Sharon doesn't survive, there are two important factors to keep in mind: First, there will be a coalescence around [acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert \(templateC07.php?CID=193\)](#) to demonstrate continuity and Israel's capacity to persevere and deal effectively with any security challenges in the near term. For Olmert, who joined Sharon in Kadima and has been both a partner and an instigator of Sharon's policy of disengagement from the Palestinians, this may build his stature and make him a natural successor. Second, and more important, there is a consensus in Israel for dissociating from the Palestinians. Few in Israel believe that the Palestinians can be partners in peace, but most accept that it is time to separate from the Palestinians and end Israeli control of them. Sharon's great appeal is that he was widely believed to be the only one who would actually take the hard steps necessary to produce real disengagement.

Standing up. In effect, most Israelis believe that anyone who is prime minister has few choices available. But they want someone who is strong enough to make those choices and tough enough to stand up to Israel's enemies. The key for those who will vie to succeed Sharon is to understand the consensus within Israel and position themselves to show that they not only reflect it but are capable of acting on it.

For the United States, this is a time to stand by Israel and let it deal with what will be an emotionally difficult period of transition. The Sharon direction is what the people of Israel want, and in all likelihood, they will gravitate to those in Israel who will be most credible in embracing it and carrying it out. In short, they will support those who, like Sharon, understand the demands of history and are looking to the future.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H. W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace*. ❖

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