

New York Times Week in Review:

Ten Voices on the New Era

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

Jan 8, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.

By Peter Edidin

One constant, in calls to the Middle East on Thursday and Friday, was the background noise of a television, set to a program that was reporting on the condition of Ariel Sharon.

Whether the person being called was a Palestinian or an Israeli, to the left or right on the political spectrum, Mr. Sharon's sudden and unexpected removal from power and to a critical care ward in a Jerusalem hospital had focused them all on the magnitude of his influence and the enormous gap left by his absence.

In Washington, too, the prime minister's incapacitation managed to overshadow even a looming Supreme Court nomination fight and major controversies over influence peddling and domestic spying.

One reason for the extraordinary degree of interest is simply historical. Mr. Sharon is one of the last of the legendary generation—which included Moshe Dayan, David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Rabin and others—who founded Israel in 1948. And he has figured in virtually every major event in the nation's history.

Mr. Sharon fought in every Israeli war, led the invasion of Lebanon, was judged indirectly responsible for the massacre of Palestinian men, women and children by Lebanese Christian forces in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982, masterminded the settlement movement in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, helped to bring the conservative Likud Party to power under Menachem Begin, overturning the long dominance of the Labor Party.

The point is, he has always been there—large, outspoken, sure of himself and infuriating to many, including many Israelis. When he came to power as prime minister in 2001, much of world opinion assumed that the peace process between the Palestinians and Israel was simply at an end.

And yet, in an astonishing act, Mr. Sharon, the most resolute opponent of Arab demands, decided that the nation's security and its future required that Israel relinquish control over the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians. Most observers believe he would have soon followed by withdrawing from parts of the West Bank, too.

To carry out his vision of disengagement and partition, Mr. Sharon created, out of little beyond the force of his personality, a new centrist party called Kadima. And until his stroke, polls showed him—and the array of prominent politicians who had flocked to his banner—well ahead in the parliamentary elections scheduled for March.

How much further he would have gone in pursuing a comprehensive, final peace with the Palestinians is unclear,

but many believe that is precisely what he hoped to achieve.

The question now, again assuming that Mr. Sharon is unable to return to power, is what his legacy will be. Will Kadima survive without him, prosper in the elections and, under the leadership of Ehud Olmert, the acting prime minister, go on to realize Mr. Sharon's plans? Or will Likud, under the leadership of the hard-right former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, return to power? Will the Labor Party make new gains?

And will the Palestinians and the Arab nations, deprived of Mr. Sharon as a useful bogeyman, begin to put their own houses in order and deal more constructively with Israel?

A number of Middle East experts and policymakers were asked in phone interviews to offer their own initial, off-the-cuff answers to these and other questions. If nothing else, their responses illustrate how large is the space that Mr. Sharon occupied until last week.

Michael B. Oren

Michael B. Oren is a senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem and the author of *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*.

Ariel Sharon is like having Thomas Jefferson in the White House. He's a founding father, and he's sui generis in Israeli politics. Even people who opposed him feel they've lost a father figure; he embodies the Zionist ideals and every Israeli controversy. He's a symbol of Israel's contradictions. The Kadima Party will not win a landslide election without Sharon, so we're back in coalition politics. The question is, will it be center-right or center-left?

My guess is center-right.

That means the chances of unilateralism are greater, and since the Palestinian entity, right now anyway, is in a Hobbesian state, we need a party that can unilaterally redraw Israel's borders.

The big wild card is: Qassam rockets on the West Bank. If they succeed in launching them, Israel's flexibility really shrinks because the main airport is in range, as are many of Israel's industrial centers.

But the implicit Israeli line is, "Yes, we're drawing a line."

It's going to happen. After 40 years of deep division, now maybe 75 percent of Israelis are pretty clear about where they want to go. The Israelis want it and if they don't get it, they won't send their sons and daughters to fight over there.

Shibley Telhami

Shibley Telhami is the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, College Park.

It's one of the most confusing times.

In Israel, Sharon has come to symbolize the possibility of an agreement with the Palestinians. He overcame along the way the legacy of Lebanon, which seemed to mark his political death. He's made a remarkable journey in overcoming that stigma.

On the Arab and Palestinian side, however, he never overcame that legacy. In October, we conducted a public opinion poll in six Arab countries. We asked who, among world leaders, they disliked most. Sharon was far out in front, followed by George Bush.

But he did overcome that legacy with many Arab leaders, particularly Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt, and some Palestinians. Arab leaders saw in him a man who was strong enough to deliver. But they didn't know yet if he truly accepted a Palestinian state that would be acceptable to them.

Now there is uncertainty, and I was not especially optimistic about a prospect for a peace deal even before Sharon died. There is a lot of uncertainty in the Palestinian polls about their future, and in Israel it is not clear what will emerge in the spring elections.

Secondly, I believe that Palestinian and Israeli expectations about what must be done immediately are so different that the any agreement Sharon could deliver—a limited Palestinian state and a postponement of all major issues, especially Jerusalem—was not something the Palestinians could have lived with. Jerusalem remains the most important issue for the Palestinians, bigger than refugees or borders.

In that sense, even with Sharon in power, we could have been heading for trouble.

On the optimistic side, the uncertainty about the future is going to accelerate a process that is essential in both societies. They are going to have to come to grips with things that have been covered up.

The Palestinians are facing real choices in the role of religion in their society and the role of the political elites.

If you look at Kadima, it was a one-man party. It's not an ideology, unlike Likud, and there is no infrastructure and there are no institutions. People joined it because they thought Sharon could deliver. And the real question now is whether Ehud Olmert can fill the need the Israelis feel for a third way on foreign policy, between Labor on the left and Likud on the right.

The reality is that this is a fluid situation, in which people's identities and priorities are in flux. In such times, outcomes are often determined by the unpredictable. Personalities and leadership, and unexpected events often determine them.

For instance, if you have a lot of suicide bombings, Olmert may rise to the occasion, when all the lights are shining on him, in a way that inspires. Or maybe not.

Within Arab public opinion, the response has been that the end of Sharon makes no difference. But that is not true for the elites and political leadership of Egypt, Jordan or among the Palestinians. The Egyptian government now thinks it has a problem. Their strategy for the coming year was based on Sharon winning in the March elections and having him as a partner in peace process. The same was true in Jordan, and even with Abu Mazen to some extent.

It's fascinating to see how Hamas views the passing of Sharon, and they are the most important players in a way. There is no particular individual who speaks for them, in part because of the Israeli assassination strategy. But I would have to think that they see the political end of Sharon as a relatively good thing, since they assume that the Palestinian public was supporting Abu Mazen in part because they thought a deal was possible with Sharon, and they knew Sharon would deal with him.

Hanan Ashrawi

Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian legislator and educator, is a candidate for Parliament in the upcoming Palestinian elections.

Sharon was a dominating, charismatic historical figure, who reinvented himself to be seen as a leader and a peacemaker. He created a party that is based on one-man rule and one-man control; the name "bulldozer" applies to him politically and not just to the bulldozers he used to build the settlements.

Right now Ehud Olmert is still acting prime minister, and the weaker he feels, the more hardline they will be. We expect a great deal of unilateralism and more hardline policies. Also, with an election in Israel soon, there will be an escalation of one-upmanship and sloganeering about being tough on the Palestinians.

This is in the short term. In the long term, there will be a major readjustment. When Yasir Arafat died I said that after the passing of a major historical figure, he cannot be replaced by another one. No one will fill Sharon's shoes, so

there may be more consolidation of the institutions of politics.

I expect the Israelis to be more hardline and less flexible on security issues—as their leaders try to prove they are more hardline than Sharon and truer to his legacy.

In the elections, Likud is seen as extreme hardline party; Kadima holding in the center, and Labor on far left. But that map cannot remain because Kadima relied on Sharon; I don't know how much power and legitimacy it will have now.

Sharon's absence will not bring the peace camp to power. A weak and insecure system will become more hardline, I think. But we have to see how this earthquake resettles this terrain.

Uri Dromi

Col. Uri Dromi is the Director of International Outreach and the editor in chief of publications at the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI). He served in the Israeli Air Force from 1964–1989.

I was Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's spokesman on the day he was assassinated. I remember the feeling that everything had collapsed and that nothing would be the same.

But power was transferred smoothly to Shimon Peres. Then he lost the election. Politics took over and everyone realized that Israel is more viable than its leader, that there was enough vitality here to give us new leaders, or to pull together and move on.

So as a veteran of the Rabin assassination, I look at the situation and see a very capable man, Ehud Olmert, who ran Jerusalem, the most difficult city in the world, and who's been around. The guy is shrewd and decisive. He's arrogant and some people hate him, but when they look at what they're getting, it's a guy who knows what he's doing.

Remember that when the party bosses found Golda Meir, she was half-retired and sick with cancer. But the bosses said, "Don't retire, come back."

In a poll before she was nominated, she got 6 percent approval. Six weeks later, as prime minister, she got 60 percent. It tells you what the title of prime minister gives you here in Israel. It's not about politics and taxes and such. It's about existence. He's the guy who is in charge of your security

The psyche here is still about existence.

Three months as prime minister now will make or break Ehud Olmert. And I think the guy will not miss this opportunity.

Obviously, there will be some frustrations and some people will drift back to where they came from—to Likud or Labor. But Sharon produced in the last years a desire for normalcy in Israel. He said, "We're going forward, but unilaterally," and people loved it.

Even if Kadima doesn't get the forty seats in Parliament the polls were suggesting, or forty-two, let's say they get twenty-five and Labor gets twenty in the March elections. And then they form coalitions with two more parties.

Then you have a team that can go ahead with the peace process, unilaterally or not. It's not Sharon, it's not charismatic and military, but there will also be more emphasis on social policies. And this could be blessing in disguise, because Israel deserves a more civil society.

Bibi Netanyahu will definitely benefit in the short run from Sharon's removal from power because some people who defected from Likud will now have second thoughts. So they might go back to Likud whether they like him or not. And he was responsible for recovery of the economy, so the big money might look at him favorably.

But basically, Bibi has identified himself as an ideologue, and people are really yearning for something in the middle.

Bibi reminds them of the past. He speaks of conflict. His world is a world of conflict. These other people in Kadima will promise Israelis progress and change and compromise on the West Bank. And therefore on Election Day, Bibi will not be as successful and he feels he will be in the next couple of weeks.

The loser in this thing will be Amir Peretz from the Labor Party, who started very high, talking about social issues. But Israelis were more ready to talk about this when Sharon was around. They said, "I can vote with this guy" because Sharon was there taking care of security. Without him, people will think twice.

Of course, everything here depends on more factors—like the Iranians, Hezbollah and Bashir Assad. The problem is that too many people have veto power on our life and everything could go wrong.

Saeb Erekat

Saeb Erekat is the chief negotiator for the Palestinian Authority in its peace talks with the Israelis.

This man made a political volcano when he left Likud, and is making another one now. We wish him well and his family, but we Palestinians live underneath this volcano.

Sharon did not consider us as partners; he opted for unilateral steps. He left Likud to form Kadima because he wants to make a unilateral agreement on the West Bank.

But unilateralism will not work. This vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence can only be broken through negotiations. Whoever is elected prime minister in Israel will be our partner, but will the Israelis elect someone who will revive the peace process? We need a partner.

Lets hope as a result of both elections that both peoples elect someone who wants to meet on the negotiating table and not on the battlefield.

Hirsch Goodman

Hirsch Goodman is a columnist for The Jerusalem Report and a senior fellow at the Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv.

I had a very tempestuous relationship with Ariel Sharon. But in the last few years I think he matured. He would say, "What you see from there, I don't see from here." That was the key; the view from the prime minister's office changed him.

He wasn't concerned about the future, but about his legacy. He didn't wanted it to be the Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1982.

He outmaneuvered everyone at every turn and showed incredible leadership. He was the first prime minister in the history of Israel to challenge the settlers and the hegemony of the ultraorthodox. At so many levels he did the right thing for the country.

But I think what we have to realize is that Sharon's strength is that he wasn't involved in the peace process; he was involved in the disengagement from the Palestinians—in pulling out.

What Sharon promised was more unilateralism, in the realization that the Palestinians in the post-Arafat era have to pick up the pieces and recreate their society.

His legacy is that for the first time there is a centralist party that is technocratic rather than ideological in nature. I think where he was heading was recognition of a Palestinian state, taking down thirty, forty or fifty outlying settlements in the West Bank to give the Palestinian state contiguity, and I think he was the only guy perceived as having the strength and skill to deliver on that.

The common wisdom on the Kadima party was that he was the glue that held it together. But I think they have a good

chance in the next election if they present a united front. I think Ehud Olmert, who doesn't have much popular support, is perceived as having lots of experience as Sharon's point man on disengagement.

Basically, Sharon is a little bit like the Lubavitch rebbe. He's gone but his spirit prevails.

Also, I think the leaders of Kadima are all power-hungry enough, and the only way they can maintain power is to remain unified. If it was just in the national interest, I wouldn't give it a chance.

David Makovsky

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Sitting with Arab officials, they all see Sharon in a dual way; on the one hand they've demonized him for many years. On the other hand they have this respect for him as the only one in the Middle East who is a man with a plan.

You had to answer this question: How do you create partition when there is no trust?

What he understood was that if the public had zero faith in the enterprise of peacekeeping and zero faith in the other side, that you could still yield land and not make Israel more vulnerable. He saw that.

The status quo was untenable, but you needed a new model, and that's what Sharon introduced into the equation.

It's clear that the United States bet its policy on Ariel Sharon's new direction. The \$64,000 question is whether Sharonism can survive Sharon. The United States has a big stake in this.

The calculus is that for there to be a meaningful next move there needed to be a broader center that believed it was in Israel's interest to disengage, or withdraw from, the West Bank.

Sharon drew many people, in numbers even greater than Yitzhak Rabin, to the center. And the betting was that on March 29, after the Israeli election, Sharon would be on the line to the White House saying, "George, I did it. I won and there is a broad new center party. And either there will be a broad center party on the West Bank to deal with or I'm going to withdraw on my own."

The United States is still waiting for March 29, but will that broad center survive without him at the helm? Can this group of people who defected from the major parties be as appealing to the Israeli public as Sharon, who was part father figure and part leader, and whom they trusted not to sell their security for a ceremony on the White House lawn?

It's going to be a much tighter race now. Ehud Olmert will reach out to Shimon Peres to his left, Shaul Mofaz (the Israeli defense minister) to his right and to all the others in between and try to project a collective leadership and say: "We are the Sharon legacy party. We will carry out Sharon's wishes."

But even if these guys in the Kadima Party win, the question is can they do what Sharon did, which is to roll up dozens and dozens of settlements?

Sharon could say, "I built these settlements, and just as I thought in was in the national interest to build them, now I'm telling you it's in the national interest to take them down."

Also, I think the Bush administration is pushing Abbas to have the Palestinian elections on time, when there's chaos in Gaza, and the old guard in Fatah is sabotaging the emergence of any young new people.

If Hamas does very well, Netanyahu will seize on that and say, see, see, this is what the Sharon policy brought us. He'll blame the Israeli pullout in Gaza.

So the election on its own is ill timed and could have a cascading effect in leading to a more polarized Israeli result in the absence of Sharon.

Khalil Shikaki

Khalil Shikaki is the director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

There is no doubt that Sharon evokes all kinds of emotions among Palestinians. They remember this man as being tough and brutal, and as responsible for the massacres in Lebanon and the brutal pacification of the Gaza Strip in the early 1970s.

In early 2001, Sharon said he would defeat the intifada through force, but four years later he realized he could not defeat the intifada. Disengagement was forced on him by Palestinian violence, but also because he failed to deliver an end to the violence and came to recognize the limits of force.

Sharon, in pulling out from Gaza, basically embraced what the majority of the Israelis wanted and made it his strategy.

In doing so, my own view is that Sharon did something that could be extremely helpful in the peace process. For a long time, the Israeli public was becoming a lot more moderate on the peace process. But at the same time Palestinian violence was pushing Israelis to want leaders who would be brutal toward the Palestinians.

When Sharon decided to follow the public rather than lead it, he did something that will change the environment of peacemaking. He created a new majority in the Parliament that is willing to embrace the moderate views of the Israeli public. He created, in the last two years, a harmony between the leadership and the public's views.

For the first time, since 1992, when Rabin was elected prime minister, we will have all three elements moving together: a more moderate public; a majority in Parliament moving in same direction; and a leader—had Sharon survived in office—who shared their views.

Rami G. Khouri

Rami G. Khouri is editor at large of The Daily Star in Beirut, Lebanon.

Sharon I think is a kind of tragic figure. He's kind of like O.J. Simpson. He's a historic, charismatic special man, a pioneer and daring, gifted and courageous. But he also has a flaw, which keeps pushing him toward criminality and violence. So the net result of all these things is that he will be seen in a very mixed way in the future.

There is a huge mistake that people are making, which is to judge his tactics rather than his results. The reality on the ground is that if you assess his policies over the years, he has had few successes. He also leaves the political landscape fragmented, angry, violent and uncertain. Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad are also part of his legacy. And the fact that Muslim Brothers are getting elected all over the place is a direct consequence of twenty or thirty years of his policies.

My view is that he never came to the conclusion that the quality of the individual and national rights of the Palestinians and the Israelis must be the same. But in his recent move toward the center, he was kind of a ghost of Rabin.

These are people who spent their whole lives occupying, subjugating and killing Palestinians and Arabs. But finally toward the end of his life he created Kadima and it's possible that he saw the light, after all these years using all the military might at his disposal and still the Palestinians were firing rockets at him from Gaza.

Still, before he went to the hospital, he was desperately trying to recreate in northern Gaza the failed security concept he tried for eighteen years in Lebanon without success. And the wall, which pens Israelis in as well as keeps Palestinians out, is a testament to failure, not success. Unilateralism was a sign of diplomatic failure.

So he dazzled us with his boldness, but in the end he was an illusionist more than a real statesman. He never really produced results when it came to the big issue, which was to get Israel secure and safe and accepted in the region.

The big question now is about this tantalizing Israeli political center. Is it real or was it only rallying around the force of his personality? The other question is what will the Palestinians and other Arab societies do to influence Israeli politics? I think people are talking about this, but the Arabs, unfortunately, have been pretty incompetent in trying to mobilize the Israeli center.

In the end it comes down to leadership. I'm a little pessimistic because I don't see the quality of leadership on either the Israeli or the Palestinian side, and the rest of the Arab leaders are playing with their toes.

Robert Malley

Robert Malley is the Middle East and North Africa program director for the International Crisis Group in Washington.

My first sense is that, when you look back, you realize how Sharon made it possible for everyone else not to have a policy. After Yasir Arafat's death, the Palestinians didn't have to govern themselves because Sharon did it for them.

The Israeli public didn't know where to go, so they basically put their trust in the hands of a man who said, "I have the answers," even though he didn't tell them what they were.

For the Bush administration, they didn't have to come up with a policy of their own in an area they understand and in which they didn't want to waste political capital. So they piggybacked on Sharon's policies.

Now that he's gone, everyone around him has the burden of coming up with strategies and policies, which they didn't seem capable of in the last four or five years. This was certainly true of the Bush administration and the Palestinians.

This may force the Bush administration to confront what they can do in the next three years. And the Israeli public may ask some sharp questions of where Ehud Olmert wants to go.

I think unilateralism will survive, but maybe not Sharon's kind of unilateralism. They will finish the barrier, consolidate control over Jerusalem and so on. Those things are now part of the national consensus. But the other part, that of dismantling settlements, may not survive.

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)