

Sharon's Leadership Altered Landscape

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In Israel yesterday, Ariel Sharon's allies and his adversaries were praying for his life. But even if the man who has fought or led Israel in every war since its independence does not survive this battle against a massive stroke, his five years as prime minister have already left a remarkable stamp on the history of his country.

During that time, Mr. Sharon registered three main accomplishments.

The first was to defeat the Palestinian uprising he inherited when he took over Israel's government in 2001. For the previous six months, Israel had tried to quell the violence and terror launched by Yasser Arafat through Oslo-era diplomacy, coupled with a tactical military response.

When Mr. Sharon became prime minister, he took a different tack. He retook territory under Palestinian control, isolated Mr. Arafat inside his Ramallah compound and authorized "targeted killings" -- assassinations -- of bomb makers and their ringleaders. It was an aggressive strategy, one that took a heavy price in human life and in international public opinion.

But Mr. Sharon persisted and -- with the strategic support of the United States -- was eventually proved right. Terrorism has not been extinguished, of course, but even today the radical Hamas prefers a tactical cease-fire and a political campaign to capture Palestinian power from within to an open confrontation with Israel.

Mr. Sharon's second achievement was to fundamentally change Israel's approach to peace and security with its Arab neighbors. Since the 1967 Middle East War, every Israeli government subscribed to some variation of the idea of "land for peace."

Mr. Sharon realized that this formula might have worked when Israel had responsible partners such as Egypt and Jordan but that it handcuffed Israel to an untenable security posture if there were no trustworthy partner with whom to negotiate. Mr. Arafat proved himself unwilling to be such a partner, and so far, his replacement -- Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas -- has shown himself no more willing, in a practical sense, to fulfill that role.

The result was a bold and risky decision by Mr. Sharon to break out of the constraints of "land for peace" and create an alternative mode. While maintaining diplomatic niceties by subscribing to the Bush administration's "road map to Middle East peace," Mr. Sharon's real strategy was for Israel to take matters into its own hands and decide its own fate.

This was translated into the construction of a security barrier through the West Bank to prevent terrorist infiltration and the withdrawal of soldiers and settlers from Gaza. Time will tell whether this strategy of unilateralism provides Israel more security; many on the Arab side view Israel's withdrawal from Gaza as a sign of retreat under fire. But it certainly reflects Mr. Sharon's view that in matters of life and death, Israel can ultimately rely on no one but itself.

In political terms, Mr. Sharon's military strategy may have endeared him to his Likud faithful but his Gaza policy left him alienated within his own party. His insight was to recognize that if he couldn't beat the hard-liners in the Likud, it was better to leave 'em than to join 'em.

The response of Mr. Sharon -- truly remarkable for a man of his age, 77, and position -- was to break free, leave his party and form his own centrist group, called Kadima (Forward). Israeli political analysts have long noted that the country's two main parties -- Labor and Likud -- were ideological misfits for a country whose large floating middle rejected the peace strategy each offered.

Mr. Sharon tapped a feeling among many Israelis that Palestinian fecklessness on peacemaking should not alone deter Israel from addressing the demographic and geographic imperatives of security. The result has been that in the few weeks of its existence, Kadima has drawn supporters from across the political spectrum, registering poll numbers that dwarf those of Labor and Likud.

But this political legacy of centrism -- Mr. Sharon's third accomplishment -- is still unfinished. Israel has never dealt kindly to political pioneers who embrace pragmatism over ideology. Centrist parties have repeatedly risen only to collapse after one election, and Kadima has not even faced its first.

The legacy of Labor's defeat in 1996, soon after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, suggests that Israelis do not vote for nostalgia. Without Mr. Sharon at its helm -- or with a bed-ridden Sharon still recovering from the terrible effects of this second stroke -- Kadima faces its own uphill battle for survival.

Yet there is something about Israel after five years of Mr. Sharon's leadership -- a certain aversion to illusion, perhaps -- that suggests the party he founded may be different from its failed centrist predecessors.

There are two useful indicators of this: first, how well the men around Mr. Sharon (his sons and his longtime adviser, Dov Weisglass) work together with the politicians, led by acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who will inherit Kadima. And, second, whether those politicians themselves -- who range from former Labor Prime Minister Shimon Peres to current Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz -- can maintain unity without the glue of Mr. Sharon's overwhelming personality.

With Israeli elections just 10 weeks away, the fate of this critical part of Mr. Sharon's legacy will soon be clear.

Robert Satloff is executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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