

# Drastic Measure

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

Nov 23, 2005

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon dropped a political bombshell by leaving the party that he helped to form in 1973, shattering the political status quo in Israel.

Mr. Sharon made the move because he wants his legacy to be that he shaped the borders of Israel in any two-state agreement with the Palestinians. He believes the Likud party apparatus—still roiling from Gaza disengagement—constrains his current policy and would restrict future policy initiatives toward the Palestinians since the Likud Central Committee, which is composed of more hawkish activists, and not Mr. Sharon would determine the next parliament list. Mr. Sharon will not be able to ensure broad parliamentary backing for any future initiative that he might choose to take in dealing with the Palestinians.

Mr. Sharon's unique move—never has a sitting Israeli prime minister left the ruling party to form a new party—could drastically realign Israeli politics. A Likud split would likely make the alignment of Israeli parties more closely mirror the views of Israelis on the core issue of relations with Palestinians. Currently, two-thirds of Israelis support a two-state solution with the Palestinians. A portion of this two-thirds belonged to the Likud, which also is backed by security-minded supporters like Mr. Sharon and opponents of Palestinian statehood.

Preliminary polls suggest that public support for the Likud will be halved, potentially marginalizing a party that has dominated Israeli government for twenty of the past twenty-eight years.

Mr. Sharon's party could revitalize the Israeli political center, which has been gutted by four years of terror and violence. Mr. Sharon would be flexible enough to form coalitions with other like-minded parties and engage parties of the left and right after the March elections.

If former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu leads Likud, the party could take a more no-concessions approach to

the Palestinians. While Mr. Netanyahu could win, at least seven candidates are expected to run for Likud chairman following Mr. Sharon's departure, including Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom.

Mr. Sharon's startling move is a gamble because no third party ever has won an Israeli election.

U.S. diplomacy may be energized by Mr. Sharon's dramatic decision, even if U.S. efforts become more low-profile in the short term. Palestinian parliamentary elections in January and Israeli elections in March represent a thrashing out of the internal political debate in both societies, especially in light of the Gaza disengagement.

If elections produce Israeli and Palestinian mandates that are not in sync with each other, prospects for U.S.-brokered Israeli-Palestinian bilateral ties will be frustrated and extremist impulses among Israelis and Palestinians are bound to grow. The U.S. instinct likely will be toward bilateralism.

The U.S.-brokered deal on the Gaza crossings November 15 could also boost Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas's chances in elections in January. The United States has also used these last preelection weeks to win Israeli support for enabling Egypt to provide ammunition for Palestinian Authority security services.

Washington also must discuss with Egypt prospects for extending the ceasefire that Cairo brokered among the extremist Palestinian factions, which technically expires December 13. Opponents of an Israeli-Palestinian peace have used well-timed attacks during political campaign seasons to tip the outcome of Israeli elections.

Further, the Group of Eight industrialized countries has pledged \$3 billion in aid to the Palestinians, but little of the pledged money has arrived. Arab states have made windfall profits on oil but come nowhere close to matching G8 pledges. The United States could try to secure those pledges before the Palestinian and Israeli elections.

U.S. efforts between now and March may have to be low profile, but Washington need not be dormant. U.S. diplomacy could still help to remove some items from the domestic political context. For example, the United States has just named Maj. Gen. Keith Dayton, formerly the director for operations at the Defense Intelligence Agency, to replace Lt. Gen. William Ward as security envoy.

Given President Bush's stated desire to broaden the mandate of the security envoy, General Dayton could transform his role from adviser to the Palestinian security services to a security troubleshooter who works with Israelis and Palestinians separately and, when needed, together. The United States also needs to urge Mr. Abbas to turn his promise for disarmament legislation into a campaign platform, which he could use as a mandate after the elections.

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.



## 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

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)

