

Sharon, Netanyahu, Disengagement, and Likud Leadership

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Brief Analysis

An immediate consequence of Israel's disengagement from Gaza was Benjamin Netanyahu's August 7 resignation as finance minister, making a Likud Party leadership challenge between him and Ariel Sharon virtually inevitable. What will be the impact of such a challenge on Sharon's policy in the postdisengagement period? And how would a Netanyahu challenge affect the chances of a split within the Likud -- and perhaps a broader realignment of Israeli politics?

Netanyahu's Resignation and Disengagement

Netanyahu resigned during the August 7 cabinet meeting, saying afterward that he believed Gaza disengagement would create a "base for terror," a policy with which he could no longer associate himself. He also opposed the unilateral nature of the withdrawal, saying reciprocity is better for Israel.

Sharon charged Netanyahu with flipflopping from his earlier support. Indeed, Netanyahu voted four times for disengagement: twice in the cabinet, on June 6, 2004, and February 20, 2005, and twice in the Knesset, on October 26, 2004, and February 16, 2005. (He was absent on a Knesset vote held on July 20, 2005.) Moreover, Netanyahu pointedly refused to leave the government despite mounting appeals by critics of disengagement in the eighteen months since Sharon announced his intention to pull out of Gaza.

Critics allege that Netanyahu is disassociating himself from disengagement now in order to challenge Sharon for the Likud leadership later. In the immediate aftermath of his resignation, several polls of the Likud membership found that Netanyahu would trounce Sharon. An August 10 poll by Haaretz found that 47 percent of Likud members support Netanyahu, compared to only 33 percent backing Sharon. This despite an August 12 poll by Yediot Aharonot showing that the Israeli public backs disengagement by a margin of 58 percent to 33 percent and finds Sharon more credible than Netanyahu by a margin of 40 percent to 20 percent. Worrisome for Sharon is the fact that only fourteen of his party's forty parliamentary members consistently vote with him.

How the Leadership Challenge Could Impact Sharon's Policy

The Palestinian Authority's (PA's) performance against terror will probably do more to determine the course of Sharon's policy after disengagement than the specter of a Netanyahu challenge. The more the PA confronts Hamas, the more it will push Sharon to move forward on the Quartet's Roadmap to Middle East peace.

However, the Netanyahu challenge will have some effect, especially amid public expectations that Israel will hold elections by June 2006 at the latest. That raises the question of how Sharon will seek to consolidate his base among the Likud faithful, especially with many of the rank and file stewing over the fact that Sharon ignored the May 2004 party referendum against a Gaza pullout.

Sharon's nationally televised speech on August 15 might offer a clue to how he will act if Hamas attacks. Referring to the Palestinian leadership's need to control Hamas and other terror groups, Sharon declared, "To an outstretched hand of peace, we will respond with an olive branch, but fire will be met by fire more intense than ever." By employing violent rhetoric, Sharon wants to make clear that no one should mistake statesmanship for weakness, implying that he will not allow Netanyahu to assume the mantle of the security candidate.

In the aftermath of the Netanyahu resignation, progress on the passage crossings between Egypt and Gaza as well as between Gaza and the West Bank, and accompanying security arrangements, suddenly seems to have stopped. The reason for the pause may be largely extraneous -- namely Sharon's focus on the evacuation of the settlers, his belief that he has until October to resolve the passage issue, and the August vacations of regional diplomats, including the energetic economic envoy and former head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, who has returned to the United States. However, when talks resume, it will be interesting to see whether Sharon has to look over his shoulder amid criticism from Netanyahu.

Another issue on which Netanyahu might criticize Sharon is the route of Israel's security barrier. Netanyahu has made the inclusion inside the fence of two major settlement blocs, Ariel and Ma'aleh Adumim, a security priority. In spring 2004, he even floated the idea that he might condition his support for disengagement on a rerouting of the security barrier to include those two sites. As it stands, Ariel (population 17,500) has a local fence, but it is not fully hooked up to the broader barrier. Israel has signaled that it wants to fence in Ma'aleh Adumim (population 30,000), but so far has not done so.

Yet another potential issue of contention between Sharon and Netanyahu could be Sharon's relationship with Washington. Sharon has showcased the Bush administration's support for Gaza disengagement, and Netanyahu will likely pounce if it is clear that U.S. support for at least a decent portion of Israel's \$2 billion aid request is not forthcoming. (Netanyahu will also take credit for Israeli economic improvement during his term as finance minister. Israeli per-capita GDP recently surpassed its preintifada level of \$17,000, and overall growth was 4.9 percent in the first half of 2005.) Interestingly, President Bush's first extensive interview with an Israeli media outlet, Israel Television, occurred within a few days of Netanyahu's resignation. In the past, U.S. presidents have offered such interviews at key moments -- President Clinton spoke to the Israeli media when he thought Ehud Barak's government was collapsing in the wake of concessions offered at Camp David in 2000.

A Leadership Challenge and the Future of the Likud

The biggest question in Israeli politics is whether Gaza disengagement and the Netanyahu resignation portend a broad political realignment. Some argue that the current party map in Israel dates from the time when only the Labor Party favored territorial concessions and Likud largely rejected them. However, Gaza disengagement has demonstrated the heterogeneity of Likud, comprised both of hardliners -- who a priori reject Palestinian statehood -- and hard bargainers who believe demographic trends and other forces require accommodation. There is talk therefore of a possible "big-bang" -- the formation of a centrist, largely secular Israeli party led by Sharon, compromising part of Likud, part of Labor, and the Shinui Party -- or a "little bang," in which Sharon and like-minded politicians would break from Likud without forming a common list with people whose dovishness he would consider an electoral liability.

Labor politicians see a convergence between their own positions and those advocated by Sharon -- that is, a focus on

settlement blocs largely adjacent to the pre-1967 borders where most settlers live. Sharon, who is the architect of the settlement movement, has the requisite stature to lead a government that would dismantle settlements in the West Bank. However, with the exception of Labor minister Haim Ramon, who is a vocal Sharon enthusiast, they fear that too close an embrace would be tactically unwise, demonstrating a lack of confidence in their ability to attract voters. Labor, however, could trigger the next election if it pulls out of the government before the Knesset reconvenes for its fall session at the end of October. Other than its current leader, Shimon Peres, many in Labor want to pull out of the government once disengagement has been completed to emphasize that their positions on welfare and social issues are more liberal than Likud's.

Despite Netanyahu's edge in the polls, Sharon is likely to live up to his stated preference, which is to fight within the party rather than leave. The reasons include Sharon's age of almost seventy-eight, Sharon's belief that he founded Likud in the 1970s, his relish of party combat, his disdain for Netanyahu's lack of military experience, and his belief that veering from the two-party system has not been successful in the past. There have been a plethora of third parties over the decades; they invariably sparkle briefly but then quickly disappear, often through a consolidation with either Labor or Likud. This trend is largely due to the institutional infrastructures of the big parties, a Knesset subsidy formula that favors the big parties, and restrictions on foreign funding.

Having bet his political fortunes on the outcome of disengagement, Sharon needs to frame the issue of withdrawal not just as an improvement in the immediate security situation but rather as part of a broader, longterm strategy combined with the barrier, and possibly regulated trade, for a historic partition from the Palestinians. Sharon is counting on no more rockets launching from Gaza in the aftermath of the withdrawal and on the support of key countries, such as the United States. He hopes those developments will translate into broad public support in Israel, which will translate into his being perceived as a winner by Likud voters eager to win parliamentary elections.

Sharon is also counting on four domestic political factors:

- (1) Since 1948, neither Likud nor its precursor Herut have ever dumped its leadership.
- (2) Current support for Netanyahu reflects a sense of party grievance over being ignored, compounded with a sense of high anxiety about the confrontation with thousands of Likud-voting settlers, and time may temper this opposition.
- (3) Media speculation about a Likud split could provide Sharon with leverage in the battle with Netanyahu, since the party will fear a diminution among its ranks before an election.
- (4) Netanyahu is viewed with skepticism among critics of disengagement who believe he only left when he could not affect its implementation; the critics might split their support between Netanyahu and a purist like Uzi Landau, an antidisengagement cabinet minister whom Sharon fired and who has declared his desire to be part of a three-way race with the other two rivals.

However, if it is clear that Sharon has no hope inside the Likud, aides and ministers closest to him will urge him to leave the party before the primary, in which 150,000 dues-paying Likud members will decide the party standard bearer for the next election. Sharon's political fortunes could rise or fall based on the timing of the primary -- and that timing will be decided by the Likud Central Committee, where Netanyahu has strong support. Sharon has not determined whether he believes quick primaries after disengagement work to his advantage or not. The head of the Central Committee, cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi, has announced his intention to convene the governing body after disengagement ends to set a date for the primary election.

Conclusion

Sharon has staked his political fortunes on the Gaza withdrawal. If Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to

fire rockets at Israel from postwithdrawal Gaza, they could recreate the impact their suicide bombings had in 1996, 2001, and 2003, tilting Israeli politics rightward -- and this time, away from Sharon and toward Netanyahu.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute and author of *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Renewed Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking* (The Washington Institute, 2005).

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