

# Domestic Political Challenges in the Israel-Palestinian Arena: Options for Sharon

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## Brief Analysis

**T**wo major developments have occurred within the past week in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. First, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon achieved an initial victory on October 26, when the Knesset voted in favor of disengagement from Gaza—a significant step that has already created both opportunities and challenges. The vote was the first of many to come on the subject of Gaza withdrawal; the next such item on the parliament's agenda will be addressed on November 3, with a preliminary reading of a bill regarding compensation for Gaza settlers. Second, Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat's sudden hospitalization in Paris has raised new questions about Palestinian succession.

### Significance of the Knesset Vote

The October 26 decision passed by a margin of 67 to 45 (with seven abstentions and one absent) in the 120-member Knesset. The nature and outcome of the vote is significant for a number of reasons. First, Sharon's critics on the right have claimed that he needs a national referendum on unilateral Gaza withdrawal, given that he opposed such a measure when he ran for office in early 2003. The Knesset vote, however, provides parliamentary backing for Sharon to continue along the path of disengagement. The vote does not by itself have the statutory power to evacuate settlements, but it makes clear that Israel's overall momentum is aimed at withdrawal from select areas won in the 1967 war. In fact, all of the Likud ministers, apart from Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, have backed off from their ultimatum: hold a national referendum or leave the government in fourteen days. Netanyahu was embarrassed by media disclosures that he conspired with other Likud ministers up to the minute of the vote to deprive Sharon of his needed majority.

Second, the fact that the vote was spearheaded by Sharon is important in of itself. The architect of the settlement movement is now committed to evacuating twenty-one settlements in Gaza and four in the northern West Bank. This has generated heated opposition among settlers and other constituencies. According to Shin Bet director Avi Dichter, at least 200 credible domestic threats have already been issued against Sharon as a result of his Gaza plan.

Third, it was significant that more than half of Likud supported Sharon, who has been at loggerheads with his own party over disengagement (twenty-three Likud parliamentarians voted for the measure and seventeen opposed it).

This was comparable to the aftermath of the 1978 Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel, when the Knesset voted on dismantling Sinai settlements. Then, too, a Likud prime minister, Menachem Begin, convinced a majority of his own party (28 of 45 Likud parliamentarians) to approve withdrawal. Like Sharon, Begin required the assistance of the opposition Labor Party in order to reach a majority in the parliament. Yet, it was not suggested at the time that Begin required a referendum to gain legitimacy for the vote.

In an interesting side note to the October 26 vote, none of the Arab members of the Knesset opposed the measure, despite Arab complaints about the insufficiency of the Gaza disengagement plan. Six abstained, and two members sympathetic to Israel's Islamist movement voted for it.

#### Sharon's Coalition Options

Although the Knesset vote helped lift the Gaza disengagement plan over one parliamentary hurdle, it also highlighted differences within Sharon's coalition. As it is currently configured, his minority government of fifty-eight members of parliament is unstable. It includes twenty-three individuals who voted against him on October 26: seventeen from Likud and six from the pro-settler National Religious Party. The latter party is expected to formally withdraw from the coalition government next week.

Moreover, the Knesset's twenty-one-member Labor faction has offered to support Sharon only on peace issues, reserving the right to topple him in a no-confidence vote on economic issues. Indeed, Labor leader Shimon Peres has stated that his party will not support the first reading of the current budget slated for a vote this week, and it is unclear whether the coalition will back it. There are limits to the practice of holding a continuing resolution in lieu of a budget. By Israeli law, if a budget is not passed by the end of March of a given year, elections must be held within five months thereafter. This fact may lead Sharon to believe that he has room to maneuver until spring. Yet, a no-confidence vote on economic issues can arise at any time. Until last week's Knesset vote, Sharon felt that he had some political insulation, hoping that he could persuade the fifteen ultraorthodox Knesset members to trade political assistance for financial support. Specifically, if they abstained on disengagement, the net effect would be the creation of dual safety nets for Sharon: Labor would prevent his government from falling on peace-related issues such as Gaza disengagement, while the ultraorthodox would ensure that he was not toppled over economic issues. This strategy suffered a blow, however, when all fifteen ultraorthodox Knesset members voted against disengagement, demonstrating that they could not be reliable allies for Sharon—whether from inside or outside the coalition—in the coming months. At the same time, the ultraorthodox have become increasingly poverty stricken in recent months; as such, they are the biggest proponents of budgetary welfare provisions that Netanyahu has pledged to cut.

As long as he can avoid tough choices, Sharon is likely to avoid having to decide between new elections and a reconfigured government that includes Labor, at least in the near term. Given the inherent instability of his minority government, however, it would come as no surprise if he was in fact forced to choose between these options. Neither option is particularly attractive to Likud. Elections would incur both inter- and intra-party risks for Likud parliamentarians. Accordingly, they will no doubt urge Sharon to avoid scenarios that jeopardize the popularity of the party itself or their own position within it. Likud's internal divisions regarding disengagement contrast somewhat with polls showing that more than 60 percent of the public wants it to happen. Hence, there is no guarantee that Likud would be able to win a third of all Knesset seats in new elections. Knowing their fears, Sharon could plausibly use the threat of elections to ensure party support for the inclusion of Labor. A broader government would give him more flexibility in dealing with Washington after the U.S. elections, as well as in handling potential security cooperation with the Palestinians in advance of Gaza disengagement (especially in light of Arafat's health problems).

The option of bringing Labor into the government may itself frighten some Likud members into believing that their

patronage slots will be diluted. Such a move could also result in the coalition taking on a more Ashkenazic and secular hue, which would alienate three traditional pillars of Likud support: right-wing, religious, and Sephardic voters. To mollify the Likud opposition, Peres has let it be known that he will no longer insist upon becoming foreign minister. This could pacify a key opponent to Labor's entry, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, who sided with Sharon against Netanyahu in the October 26 vote.

Netanyahu, another important opponent, has argued that Labor would seek to roll back some of his free-market reforms. Yet, some wonder whether he is more focused on being the standard-bearer of the Likud hardliner faction against Sharon. The ostensible justification for such a stance would be Sharon's refusal to consider a disengagement referendum, which Netanyahu insists is necessary to avoid splintering the party. There have been reports, which Netanyahu has not denied, that he will challenge Sharon before the next election. Overall, Likud is divided over disengagement, but it cannot be stated with certainty whether these divisions will lead to a permanent split within the party. In any event, Sharon has put his life and political fortunes on the line in this battle for Israel's future.

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