

# Despite Party Setbacks, Sharon Accelerates Disengagement Strategy

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Sep 3, 2004

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## Brief Analysis

**D**espite being rebuffed again by the Likud Party two weeks ago, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon has been undeterred in pursuing disengagement. In publicly broadcast remarks, he informed his fractious parliamentary faction that he was planning to accelerate the timing of his plan for withdrawal from Gaza and four West Bank settlements by holding a cabinet vote not in March 2005, as had been expected, but on October 24 of this year. The actual removal of settlements would follow once the measure passed the Knesset. Having just returned from Israel and the West Bank, I came away with a distinct set of impressions regarding Sharon's motivations, the political levers he believes he has at his disposal in dealing with opponents inside and outside Likud, and the coalition configurations that he is weighing as he pursues his strategy to make disengagement a reality.

### Sharon's Motivations

Currently, Sharon appears to be driven by three key motivations. The first is related to demographics. In the past, Sharon has scorned the so-called "demographic challenge"—that is, the ratio of Arabs to Jews in sovereign Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Now, however, Sharon is publicly concerned about the prospect that Israeli Jews will become a minority within the next decade. At a July 15 address to Israel's National Security College, Sharon declared, "We must not ignore the demographics. It is impossible to maintain a Jewish and democratic country here, over the years, while ruling over millions of Palestinians in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza."

Sharon's second motivation concerns the potential international responses to his initiative. For example, the new date for the cabinet vote—October 24—falls just days before the U.S. presidential election. There is reason to believe that Sharon sees such a pre-election move as an insurance policy of sorts with regard to U.S. policy toward his plan. That is, if George W. Bush wins reelection, Israeli officials clearly hope that the second-term president will remember how Sharon sought to provide a notable diplomatic accomplishment on the eve of the election. And if John Kerry wins, the Gaza withdrawal plan would already be in motion once he assumed office, minimizing the prospect that a new U.S. administration could take steps that are at variance with Sharon's approach. Regarding the wider international community, Sharon is moving forward rapidly in part to prevent the emergence of a vacuum in Gaza, which international actors such as Europe or the Quartet would no doubt look to fill.

Sharon's third motivation seems to hinge on his recognition that his political fortunes are already tightly intertwined with the future of disengagement. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of Israelis want the disengagement to go forward. Hence, it was not surprising that his public standing was burnished rather than harmed after he assumed a defiant tone in dealing with defeat at the hands of the Likud Central Committee, which did not want him to broaden his coalition by bringing in the Labor Party. In fact, his approval rating shot up eight points in a subsequent Maariv/Gallup poll. Sharon understands that the broad center in Israel wants a Gaza withdrawal. Accordingly, he believes that he would face greater political peril in holding back than in moving forward. Sharon is also counting on the perception that the Likud Central Committee is increasingly preoccupied with political patronage rather than ideology, which drove its actions in the past.

#### Sharon's Political Stratagems and Levers

Sharon believes he has numerous political gambits at his disposal that will allow him to proceed with disengagement. With regard to his own party, he assumes that only some of his critics are ideologically driven, while others are motivated by narrower, partisan considerations. For example, when Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom argues that disengagement can be implemented without inviting Labor into the government, he faces domestic political criticism that he is worried only about losing his position to Labor leader Shimon Peres. In calling for the current minority government (which comprises 58 of 120 Knesset seats) to approve disengagement, Sharon is essentially challenging Shalom, Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and others to deliver on their tepid pledges of support. Failure to deliver would provide Sharon with public backing to return to his plan of bringing in Labor. Sharon is also counting on the fact that Likud does not want to go to early elections without making progress on disengagement, since it is unlikely that the party would win even the forty seats it currently holds without demonstrating such progress to the public. In contrast, Likud polls point to an electoral victory if elections are held after disengagement. There was even speculation in the Israeli media that Peres's press conference raising the prospect of elections after Sharon's defeat in the Likud Central Committee was actually coordinated by the prime minister himself.

To improve the atmosphere in the cabinet, Sharon is counting on the forthcoming recommendations of a governmental panel that will establish criteria for compensation to Gaza settlers. Sharon has made clear that he prefers immediate, attractive payments to settlers who leave voluntarily. Most Israeli officials assume that the settlers in northern Gaza and the four impacted settlements in the northern West Bank, unlike their counterparts in the south, are not ideologically driven and would be happy to evacuate as soon as possible. As for Netanyahu, Sharon believes that the best lever to apply to his principal rival is passage of a budget reflecting economic reforms that Netanyahu has championed. Sharon has pointedly defended the Netanyahu budget, slated for passage this December, on the belief that Netanyahu will reciprocate by supporting disengagement. Netanyahu's backing is key for Sharon's disengagement plans. According to Likud insider estimates, a tenuous majority of twenty-three of the party's forty Knesset members support the prime minister's plan. So far, Netanyahu's approach is to avoid any direct confrontation with Sharon. He does not want to be labeled "intrigant," as Peres was for many years in the Rabin government.

#### Safety Nets and Coalition Alternatives

Traditionally, Sharon and his party have enjoyed three bases of political support: the political right, religious factions, and Sephardic ethnic voters. By moving forward with disengagement, Sharon understands that he will lose the support of the political right. In light of his Likud setback, he seems loath to lose the religious and Sephardic bases as well. Therefore, the much-touted idea of Sharon joining forces with two other secular and largely Ashkenazic parties (either as an amalgam of coalition partners or as a new political entity) no longer seems to be in the cards. Instead, Sharon has attempted to maintain two distinct "safety nets" to ensure that his minority

government will continue. These nets seem to have helped Sharon avoid losing parliamentary votes to the opposition despite his party troubles and minority government status. Specifically, Sharon is counting on Labor to ensure that disengagement sails through the Knesset if it passes the cabinet next month. At the same time, he remains wary that Labor will seek to ambush him on economic issues. Therefore, he has begun courting the ultra-orthodox United Torah Judaism (UTJ) Party, which holds five Knesset seats. Sharon's secular coalition partner Shinui has pointed to the sharp drop in government funding of ultra-orthodox institutions and welfare as its signature achievement. Last week, however, the Sharon government suddenly transferred nearly \$25 million to UTJ-related institutions, with more to come. Shinui is expected to look the other way, especially since UTJ remains officially outside the coalition.

If, however, Sharon's current minority government cannot swing the cabinet disengagement vote, officials say that he would likely try a more dramatic move: reconfiguring the coalition to include Labor with both ultra-orthodox parties, UTJ and the Sephardic Shas Party (which holds eleven Knesset seats). According to this calculus, the ultra-orthodox parties are so desperate for government money that they would be willing to provide Sharon with political insulation. Such a scenario has its risks. For example, in order to avoid imperiling Netanyahu's economic reforms, Sharon would have to ensure that the ultra-orthodox parties were desperate enough to proffer relatively meager demands. In comparison, the current strategy of providing financial assistance in exchange for UTJ support is simpler.

## Conclusion

Sharon's Likud Central Committee defeat does not deprive him of the initiative at this key juncture. Despite losing another Likud referendum months earlier, Sharon has demonstrated the motivation and resolve to press ahead. Of course, it is reasonable to expect that the more Sharon ignores his own party, the more insistent his critics within Likud will become. The question remains how, not whether, Sharon's opponents will meet his strategy for disengagement with a determined counterstrategy aimed at thwarting any plans to leave Gaza.

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