

# Whither the Sharon Coalition?

## Implications of the Latest Cabinet Vote on Gaza

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### Brief Analysis

On June 6, 2004, the Israeli cabinet authorized (by a 14-7 margin) preparations for a possible Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. The authorization called for a final decision to be made about the Gaza settlements by March 2005. In the meantime, Israeli national security advisor Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland is heading a ministerial panel to discuss different aspects of withdrawal. The cabinet vote has triggered changes in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government. On the eve of the vote, Sharon fired two ministers from the National Union Party (NU) for opposing the plan. That move led the staunchly pro-settler NU to withdraw entirely from Sharon's government, decreasing his coalition's 68-seat Knesset majority by 7 seats. Following the cabinet vote, a minister and a deputy minister from the pro-settler National Religious Party (NRP) resigned, and both have stated that they would individually leave Sharon's coalition as well. If they do so, Sharon would for the first time preside over a minority coalition of 59 in the 120-member Knesset.

### Sharon's Challenge amid Political Weakness

The cabinet vote marked the first time that an Israeli cabinet declared a general desire to withdraw from Gaza. Toward that end, the cabinet authorized preparations for a pullout, including discussions regarding the relocation of Gaza settlers. The vote did not itself mandate the evacuation of Gaza settlements, however, but rather made clear that the withdrawal issue would have to be decided one way or another within nine months. As such, the cabinet vote falls short of the plan that Sharon presented to President George W. Bush at the White House on April 14. It would be unfair to say that Sharon is having second thoughts about his Gaza initiative, though; rather, he has been politically weakened. Despite the political risk he has incurred since April, however, the prime minister has shown a willingness to continue forward with his plan.

A key turning point in Sharon's political fortunes was the Likud Party referendum of May 2, where his Gaza proposal was defeated by a 60 to 40 margin among 190,000 party members. In previous weeks, Likud rivals of the withdrawal had seized upon Sharon's political weakness in an effort to defeat the initiative. The most damaging opposition came from a trio nicknamed the "three musketeers," led by Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Sharon's main rival, and supported by Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and Education Minister Limor Livnat. Despite their long-held

reservations about the Gaza evacuation initiative, the three initially and reluctantly supported the plan when Sharon returned from Washington in April. Once polls began to indicate declining Likud backing for the plan, however, they resumed their opposition. In wake of the May 2 referendum, they claimed that Sharon had no right to press ahead. Yet, Sharon realized that failure to move forward would have disastrous consequences, both politically and internationally. On the domestic front, such a failure would make him a lame duck, given the various polls showing that 59 to 70 percent of Israelis favor unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. Also significant was Sharon's unprecedented public acknowledgment that Israel needs to move forward for demographic reasons, hinting at the prospect that, over the next decade, Jews may well become the minority (and Arabs the majority) within the combined area of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Internationally, a failure to press ahead could potentially undercut Sharon's relationship with Bush, who embraced the Gaza plan despite criticism from the Arab world and elsewhere. Moreover, Sharon believes that if Israel does not initiate the plan now, the diplomatic vacuum in the Israeli-Palestinian arena will continue beyond the current election year—a vacuum that members of the Quartet (i.e., the European Union, the UN, the United States, and Russia) could fill with ideas that are not to his liking. Therefore, Sharon decided to press forward, threatening recalcitrant ministers with the prospect that failing to support even a more mild Gaza resolution would undermine U.S.-Israeli relations.

#### Political Consequences of the Cabinet Decision

The June 6 cabinet decision comes at a political price. First, by firing two NU ministers (Transportation Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Tourism Minister Benny Elon) and allowing two NRP ministers to resign (Housing Minister Effie Eitam, NRP's leader; Yitzhak Levy, deputy minister in the prime minister's office), Sharon has now broken from the most staunchly pro-settler elements of his cabinet. Second, the vote signals Sharon's break from the core religious leadership of the settler movement, who historically viewed him not only as their political patron, but also as a fellow true believer in the value of the movement's members as Israel's modern pioneers. Third, the fact that Sharon was forced to compromise on his original plan points to both his own weakness and to Netanyahu's reemergence as a figure willing to publicly challenge the prime minister's leadership. (Netanyahu had spent the past year avoiding public pronouncements on the Palestinian issue.) Fourth, Sharon now appears to have only a minority government of fifty-nine Knesset seats—a figure that could drop to fifty-five if the rest of the NRP faction leaves the coalition as Eitam and Levy seem poised to do. (Given that NRP is dependent on government budgetary support for its institutions and that the Labor Party could potentially replace it in the coalition, the other members of the faction have said that they will not leave the government for at least another three months.)

Currently, Sharon seems to have three options: try to maintain a shaky coalition, reach out to Labor in order to broaden his government, or call for elections. Although Sharon has reason to believe that his parliamentary base is shaky, there are no strong indications that he will be toppled over the next several months, despite reductions in his coalition. For one thing, the Labor faction met shortly after the cabinet vote and, for the first time, decided not cast a no-confidence motion against Sharon, suggesting that the party may extend a parliamentary safety net in the future. Moreover, a 2001 change in Israeli law (Basic Law, The Government, 28B) mandates a constructive no-confidence approach similar to that found in other parliamentary democracies. This provision holds that different parliamentary factions cannot bring down a given government unless they commit to jointly support an alternative leader. Such a development is highly unlikely given that opposition to Sharon consists of both Israeli Arab parties and pro-settler ministers, none of whom would be willing to unite around any alternative candidate. Therefore, Sharon should be able to make it through the current parliamentary session and the extended summer recess intact. His problems are likely to increase this fall, however, when the Knesset prepares for the passage of the 2005 fiscal budget.

In remarks made earlier today, Sharon encouraged speculation that he will reach out to Labor. In his first public

comments about that option, he said, "I didn't open negotiations with Labor, but there is no need to wait until the [summer parliamentary] recess." Sharon is aware of the clear advantage to be gained from re-creating the unity government that he established with Labor in 2001-2002. He also knows that the current coalition will not be able to evacuate Gaza settlements. Labor leader Shimon Peres has made clear that he would like to join Sharon's government. There are several hurdles to such a development, however. First, Labor does not want to join Sharon until Attorney General Menachem Mezuz announces later this month whether the prime minister will be indicted for bribery. Second, it seems unlikely that Likud would support such a move given that certain key ministers would lose their coveted portfolios to new Labor ministers. Other Likud members (e.g., Gila Gamliel) oppose an alliance with Labor because they feel it would press Sharon to make unfavorable concessions. So far, the Netanyahu faction seems to consist of at least half, if not more, of the Likud's forty seats in the Knesset. These members are bound together for reasons that are part political expediency and part ideology. Although this faction is seemingly strong enough to stop any Sharon move toward Labor, it is not strong enough to form a new majority coalition. Netanyahu may hope that the current crisis in Sharon's government will eventually lead other Likud members to join his faction. Hence, Sharon's best hope may be to hold his Likud loyalists together so that he can credibly warn Netanyahu supporters that their failure to support a unity government with Labor will mean early elections—a prospect that they would not relish a mere sixteen months after joining the Knesset, particularly given increasing public support for withdrawal. Clearly, if Sharon wants to actually implement his Gaza plan, he will need to either establish a broad-based government or take the risk of calling for new elections on the platform of such a pullout. The fact that the cabinet could not pass Sharon's full plan does not bode well for the current government's ability to preside over the evacuation of Gaza settlements in 2005.

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