

After the Likud Referendum: The Future of the Sharon Government

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Brief Analysis

On May 17, 2004, Israeli justice minister Yosef (Tommy) Lapid addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Lapid became head of the Shinui Party in 2000. Under his leadership, Shinui has rapidly grown in popularity and is now the third-largest faction in the 120-member Knesset and the second-largest in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's coalition. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Recent polls show that 70 to 80 percent of Israelis support Sharon's Gaza withdrawal initiative. Therefore, they are unlikely to accept the Likud Party referendum of May 2, 2004, rejecting this initiative. At the same time, Israel cannot afford to allow a post-withdrawal vacuum to emerge in the territories, which the Iranians could potentially fill (Tehran supports Hizballah, which in turn supplies Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad [PIJ]). Therefore, the withdrawal initiative must be altered somewhat from its original concept. Such a change would allow Sharon to say that he is accepting the ruling of his party while nevertheless moving forward with disengagement. His Gaza plan may turn out to be a three-stage process that is acceptable to Shinui. In any case, if an alternative formula is not proposed soon, Shinui will be forced to reconsider its participation in the government. We cannot sit idly and hope that Washington holds out on Israel's behalf against the interventionist tendencies—or so-called "goodwill"—of the Quartet.

Shinui's formula for conflict management differs from that of both Sharon and the Israeli left, coming as it does from the center of the Israeli political spectrum. Shinui is well aware of the Roadmap's stipulation that measures must be taken against terrorism. Although Israel should indeed resume the reciprocal processes outlined in the Roadmap, it must also recognize that Palestinian Authority (PA) prime minister Abu Ala cannot dismantle Hamas and PIJ under the current circumstances without causing a civil war. Yasir Arafat does not want to make peace. Hence, Abu Ala must unite the PA's sixteen security organizations under one entity, which he should then head rather than allowing these forces to remain under Arafat's leadership. In the past, Shinui opposed talking to Abu Ala until he put a stop to terrorism, but the party has changed its stance for the time being. When Likud rejected Sharon's initiative, Shinui realized that the right was attempting to create a stalemate. Shinui cannot subscribe to any such policy. If these delay tactics continue, international parties may attempt to enter the arena both politically and physically. Israelis must therefore take the initiative to speak with Abu Ala based on the acknowledgment that he is unable to wage a comprehensive fight against terrorist organizations. If Likud does manage to move forward with disengagement in the near term, however, Shinui will rethink its policy toward Abu Ala.

Demographic and Humanitarian Concerns

The proximity of the Israeli and Palestinian populations will continue to exacerbate various humanitarian and demographic dilemmas if left unchanged. For example, Israel has faced criticism for razing Palestinian homes used as platforms for attacks against Israeli soldiers. Although Israel does not revel in such actions, they are necessary under the current circumstances. To be sure, Palestinian militants who use homes as cover for attacks should consider their own lack of humanitarian concern for those living there.

Moreover, Gaza has a population of approximately 1.3 million and the second-highest birthrate in the world. Hence, the territory has no future as it is presently constituted and will remain a major humanitarian problem. This fact serves as another reason for Israel to relinquish the territories—they contain a demographic time bomb that could destroy the fabric of Israeli society and force the government to choose between democracy and dictatorship in the West Bank, Gaza, and even within the Green Line. As for the Arab minority in Israel proper, I am currently heading a government committee that is putting together a proposal to ameliorate the persistent remnants of past discrimination against them.

The West Bank Fence

The security fence currently under construction in the West Bank is justified as a defensive measure against terrorism. Some changes are in order, however. The planned route of 700 kilometers should be shortened to 500 kilometers and moved closer to the original border, while the barrier itself should be built more quickly and cheaply. Israel will have to defend those settlements that fall on the Palestinian side of the fence, since they will be more prone to attacks than they currently are. Moreover, Israel will likely have to annex certain large West Bank settlements in the long term; for example, communities such as Ariel have upwards of 30,000 residents, and no Israeli government can force them to withdraw. Hopefully, sufficient goodwill can be generated to support an eventual final-status agreement in which Israel annexes the relatively small portion of West Bank territory on which nearly 80 percent of the settlers live. Indeed, the world will have to accept this as a reasonable solution and as the price that Arabs must pay for waging war against Israel. Such a solution would not be unprecedented in history.

Potential Effects of a Sharon Indictment

If Attorney General Menachem Meuz indicts Sharon, then Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu would likely take his place as prime minister. Although the constitution does not require Sharon to resign if indicted, Shinui has announced that it would leave the cabinet if Sharon refused to resign. In any case, an indictment would spur Shinui to increase its demand for Labor to join the government.

Shinui supports Netanyahu's economic policy—after all, it is effectively Shinui's policy, not Likud's. Indeed, Shinui's popularity has increased not only because of the party's efforts to halt religious coercion, but also because it has come to represent the previously unrepresented middle class, which is a vibrant political force in Israel. As a result of this shift, Shinui has increased its representation in the Knesset from one seat to fifteen over the past five years.

U.S. Stakes in Iraq

If the final outcome of the war in Iraq is perceived as a defeat for the United States, then it will be tantamount to a national, ideological, and religious message to the Islamic world that the jihadist approach is effective against the West. Such a development would have negative ramifications for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, strengthening those parties who do not want to engage in a peace process with Israel and emboldening them to wait until the fabric of Israeli society collapses under the strain of terror.

The bond between the United States and Israel has strengthened immensely over the past few years. Both countries face a common threat from terrorism. Islamic fundamentalism is behind the terrorism in Israel and threatens to destabilize not just the Middle East, but the entire world. The United States has come to understand this threat in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The Europeans do not yet understand it, however; as I told German vice chancellor Joschka Fischer, "You will understand us better when the Brandenburg Tower comes down, and it will happen unless something is done to stem the tide of terrorism."

The West, Islam, and the Prospects for Peace

Samuel Huntington's assessment is correct—over the next century, Western civilization will be forced to fight for its existence against the increasing danger of Islamic terrorism, which itself is based on hatred, envy, and a form of devotion that Westerners cannot understand. The West has succeeded thus far by proving that Western democracy can thrive even in difficult circumstances. Hence, when people say that they hate the world because of Israel, I would counter by saying that they hate Israel because of the Western world.

Finally, it must be remembered that there are no grand schemes that will bring peace forever. There are only partial solutions that provide a modus vivendi under certain circumstances. When these circumstances change, so must the partial solutions. This is a pessimistic but pragmatic view. The United States is a solution-oriented society, and to stand up before such a society and say that one does not have a panacea will not enhance one's electoral prospects. Yet, one must adapt to changing circumstances.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Barak Seener. ❖

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