

Sharon's Likud Referendum Troubles

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Brief Analysis

On Sunday, May 2, Likud members will hold an unprecedented party referendum on Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan. Polls among the 193,000 party members suggest rank and file party members may oppose Sharon's plan by a seven to ten point margin. Should Sharon's plan be defeated, this could create political turmoil in Israel.

Why Is Sharon Behind?

Sharon was not supposed to be on the verge of defeat. After all, during his trip to Washington, President George W. Bush hailed his "bold leadership" and endorsed the withdrawal. The Bush letter to Sharon was widely cited as a major achievement for the prime minister. At the same time, key Likud ministers—Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, and Education Minister Limor Livnat—who had voiced opinions ranging from reservations to outright opposition to the plan, issued their endorsements in the wake of the White House visit. Moreover, the killing of the Hamas leader in Gaza, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, reminded the Likud rank and file that Sharon was not trading his hawkish talons for dovish feathers. However, his proposal may yet be defeated. There are several possible reasons for this.

First, unlike the more ideologically homogeneous Labor Party, Likud is a more heterogeneous mix of hardliners and hard-bargainers. There are those who, a priori, oppose yielding land on the ideological ground that it is biblical patrimony. They will not be impressed by Sharon's achievements. Hardliners in the party were not happy when former prime minister Menachem Begin yielded Sinai to Egypt as part of the 1979 Egypt peace treaty, when Likud leader Yitzhak Shamir began discussing Palestinian autonomy, nor when Likud leader Netanyahu agreed to yield 13 percent of the West Bank as part of the 1998 Wye agreement. It may be recalled that the Likud governments of both Shamir and Netanyahu were brought down by a split within the right.

Second, some Likud members fear that the Gaza withdrawal is not hard bargaining: by not placing obligations on the Palestinians, it could serve as a precedent for further unilateral West Bank withdrawals, and it could embolden Palestinian rejectionism. This case has been made by, among others, Benny Begin, son of the famous Menachem Begin, and someone who retired from politics amid disillusionment with both the Israeli political system and the Oslo agreement. According to a poll by Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot released today, only 35 percent of Likud members believe the disengagement will strengthen Israeli security, while 42 percent say it will be weakened.

Sharon has not sufficiently explained the rationale for a unilateral pullout to the party faithful. This creates ideological dissonance. The organizing principle of the Likud has been opposition to territorial concessions, and now its leader—the historical architect of the settlement movement—is calling for the evacuation of some of them.

Third, Sharon's supporters have been outmatched organizationally by energized Jewish settlers—some of who believe they are fighting for their homes, and who are trying to meet personally with most of the 193,000 Likud members. Ample funding, much of it believed to originate from an American donor, is paying for phone banks, mass mailings, bumper stickers, compact discs, and voter drives to bring Likud members to the ballot box. Amid growing opposition to the Gaza withdrawal among the Likud faithful, three key government ministers—Netanyahu, Livnat, and Shalom—have muted their already tepid support.

Fourth, the campaign to approve the withdrawal plan has demonstrated a lack of passionate grassroots organization, and it has virtually no visibility on Israeli streets. The problem may begin at the top. Aides to Sharon were complacent upon returning from Washington, believing that U.S. support, coupled with the endorsement of the leading Israeli media outlets, assured victory. Moreover, there is no evidence that Sharon is receiving campaign funds from abroad, which have fueled past contests. There may also be a cross current of resentment among some Likud members against Sharon for reasons unrelated to ideology (e.g., failure to obtain patronage positions).

Sharon's Arguments

Sharon's top supporters, Vice Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Absorption Minister Tzipi Livni, have made several arguments. The first is self-interest—namely that withdrawal means that Israel delays the negative trend of a demographic balance that increasingly favors the Palestinians (Sharon himself is loath to make that argument). Second, they have argued that Sharon's opponents are deepening Israel's conflict with its Arab neighbors. Third, they argued that opponents to the withdrawal plan offer no alternative to maintain the support of the United States and win broader support in the world, and that failure for Israel to seize the initiative in an American election year will only ensure that less favorable proposals will be foisted upon Israel from Europe and elsewhere next year. In addition, Sharon has voiced concern that international aid organizations would pull out of the West Bank and Gaza if the current stalemate continued, thereby placing the onus upon Israel to feed millions of Palestinians. Finally, while expressing sympathy for the settler cause that he championed in the past, he distanced himself from them, portraying them for the first time publicly as a "relatively small sector," saying that as leader, he was required to exhibit "national responsibility" and focus on the national interest. This suggests that Sharon wants to make clear that he will not give the settlers a veto on Israeli diplomatic action.

While Sharon remains very popular among Likud members, it was only in television interviews today—two days before the referendum—that he declared a vote against withdrawal a vote against him and "his ability to manage the affairs of state." He raised the specter of new elections if the referendum fails.

Options after the Referendum

If Sharon is defeated, he will be weakened politically, but it is unclear if it will be fatal. Given the heat that Bush has taken from the Arabs and Europeans as a result of his support for Sharon, it would be highly unlikely that the prime minister would suddenly retreat from his plan. Justice Minister Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, who leads Shinui, the second largest party in his coalition, insists that Sharon must bring his plan to the Knesset now, even if he is defeated in the Likud.

One option no one expects Sharon to take is resigning. After all, if he wanted to resign, it would be easiest for him to announce that he would do so. Another option is for Sharon to call for a national referendum, where broad national support (70 percent in polls) makes a victory likely. This option prevents his defeat from sinking into the domestic political consciousness in such a way that could paralyze his ability to act on the withdrawal plan. It will, however, irk

party members. A third, but at present less likely, option would be to present the plan to the cabinet despite the referendum. Sharon seems to have a slight eleven to nine edge in the cabinet against opponents of the withdrawal, but the three swing ministers—Netanyahu, Livnat, and Shalom—will hold the balance of power. Even if Sharon won a vote among his cabinet, he might not win Knesset approval without support from his opponents in the Labor and Meretz Parties. He is known to be loath to pursue this course, since Labor's support is likely to be limited. Labor has made clear that it will not join a revived "national unity government" until Attorney General Menny Mezuz declares that Sharon will not be indicted for bribery. There have been unconfirmed reports this week that Mezuz is signaling that the indictment will not occur. Were that to happen, Sharon might decide on a fourth option: forming a unity government involving Labor and pressing ahead with the Gaza withdrawal plan. The final, fifth option would be for Sharon to carry out his threat of new elections—a prospect he knows the public does not relish, as Israel has held three elections in the last five years.

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