

# Sharon Leads Netanyahu before the Likud Primary

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## Brief Analysis

On Thursday, an estimated 300,000 members of Israel's Likud Party will head to the polls and decide whether they want Prime Minister Ariel Sharon or Foreign Minister Binyamin Netanyahu as their party leader. This contest has special importance because current polls show that the Likud winner is likely to emerge victorious in the January 28, 2003, national elections as well. According to a November 22 Yediot Ahronot poll, Likud is outpacing Labor by a sizable 38- to 21-seat projected margin in the 120-seat Knesset.

### Sharon's Appeal

According to another November 22 Yediot poll, this one focusing on Likud voters, Netanyahu trails Sharon by a substantial 56 to 38 percent margin. The final result could be somewhat closer, especially since the poll was taken before the November 21 suicide bombing of a Jerusalem bus, which could hurt Sharon politically. His 18 percent lead is unlikely to evaporate before Thursday's primary, however.

Sharon's success in the polls can be attributed to a variety of factors. First, historical precedent is on his side. Like its precursor, Herut, Likud has never rejected an incumbent -- let alone a sitting prime minister -- in a primary challenge. (Before becoming prime minister, Menachem Begin was the Herut standard-bearer in seven unsuccessful national elections, starting from the founding of Israel.) Moreover, Sharon has so far outmaneuvered Netanyahu while maintaining an aura of statesmanship. By offering his rival the foreign ministry portfolio following Labor's recent departure from the national unity government, Sharon not only demonstrated political magnanimity but also put Netanyahu in an almost impossible position. To refuse the prime minister's request at a time of national crisis would have seemed unpatriotic. Since Netanyahu joined Sharon's cabinet, however, his harsh criticisms of the prime minister's policies have at times appeared unseemly. These factors help explain why Sharon leads Netanyahu by an overwhelming 30 percentage points on poll questions regarding the candidates' credibility.

Indeed, Sharon's "above the fray" approach has been an important ingredient of his success. He realized that the Israeli public would not respond well if he sought to cash in on his popularity by holding elections in the immediate aftermath of Labor's departure and regular terrorist attacks against Israelis. Hence, he has worked hard to project a public image in which national interests trump the partisan. For example, although he went through the motions of seeking to assemble a narrow government, he eventually claimed that he could not complete the task due to the exorbitant demands made by right-wing, pro-settler parties. By spurning right-wing demands, Sharon positioned

himself nearer to the Israeli center, where elections are won. Moreover, although he has tried to avoid giving the impression that he is exploiting Israel's time of crisis for political ends, the fact remains that holding a general election at this time serves his interests. Given Israelis' fears regarding Saddam Husayn, Yasir Arafat, and suicide bombings, the January election date favors Likud. In contrast, if elections took place after a war in Iraq, with radical elements in disarray, Israelis could favor an accommodationist Labor Party over Likud.

Avoiding stridency has helped Sharon as well. Until the 1990s, Likud leaders were picked by a central committee whose decisions were often based on ideological activism or the desire to obtain patronage appointments. Yet, the democratization of the party has transferred these choices from the few to the many. Moreover, the number of Likud members has exploded during the recent years of conflict with the Palestinians, tripling since the previous primary in 1999. The bigger the sample of voters in the primary, the more it resembles the national electorate, as opposed to an activist-based central committee. Thus, Sharon knows that his current support for Palestinian statehood is not as damaging as it would be under the old primary system, and that Netanyahu's call for Arafat's expulsion is not as great of an electoral asset. In fact, Israeli calls for expulsion have been tempered by President George W. Bush's June 24, 2002, speech on Palestinian reform, which struck a key blow to Arafat's legitimacy.

Another success for Sharon has been his tactical ability to prevent Netanyahu from winning key allies. In fact, Sharon has used his lead and the levers at his disposal to sway Netanyahu's potential supporters to his own camp. For example, some assumed that Netanyahu would forge an alliance with former military chief of staff Gen. Shaul Mofaz. Yet, by maintaining a commanding lead, Sharon persuaded Mofaz to be his defense minister, promising that the general could keep this portfolio after the elections. Similarly, Sharon is wooing Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert, promising him the foreign minister portfolio in a new government. Sharon also made a highly publicized visit with another popular Likud vote-getter, Minister of Education Limor Livnat, accompanying her to the prison where her father, Uzi Livnat, had been jailed by the British before 1948. Moreover, Sharon won the endorsement of Dan Meridor and convinced him to rejoin the Likud ranks. Meridor is highly regarded among centrists and, as such, is an electoral asset. (Meridor has also urged Sharon to form a new unity government with Labor after the elections.) Finally, former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir is reportedly endorsing Sharon.

The one key issue that Netanyahu could have used to cut Sharon's lead is the Israel economy, which has been in a deep tailspin. Sharon's approval ratings have been consistently and overwhelmingly abysmal in this area, usually somewhere under 20 percent. Yet, Netanyahu has largely ignored this issue, choosing instead to rail on Arafat and Palestinian statehood. More specifically, he has sought to energize his right-wing base in the final days of the race by claiming that Sharon, along with Labor leader and Haifa mayor Amram Mitzna, will form a unity government predicated on establishing a Palestinian state. Therefore, despite his attempts to address economic issues within the past couple weeks, Netanyahu's message has not resonated, in part because it has not been a consistent staple of his campaign. Moreover, he has provided very few specifics on his plans for an economic turnaround. This failure has enabled Sharon to publicly question Netanyahu's insistence that the economy can be fixed without improving the political situation with the Palestinians.

#### From the Primaries to the General Election

In the event that Sharon defeats Netanyahu in the Likud primary, he will be in a commanding position for the general election. Some wonder whether Sharon might take a different approach to the peace process once he feels that he no longer has to look out for Netanyahu over his right shoulder. For example, he may decide to transfer some \$600 million to the Palestinians, fulfilling his October promise to President Bush; indeed Sharon is likely to emphasize his strong links with Washington while campaigning. Yet, he is unlikely to accept outright any "roadmap" for reciprocal Israeli/Palestinian steps toward de-escalation if he deems it to be flawed -- that is, not in keeping with Bush's past insistence that new Palestinian leadership is a sine qua non for American support of Palestinian statehood.

In any event, Sharon's strategy for capturing the center in the general election will be driven in no small part by the campaign tactics employed by Labor's Mitzna. Sharon will certainly feel less pressure to make political concessions if Mitzna fails to make inroads with the center. For example, Mitzna's acquiescence to the idea of holding talks with Arafat is unpopular, but his focus on economic issues is quite popular. Thus, Sharon is likely to repeat the strategy he has used against Netanyahu: determining the type of campaign that Mitzna will run and then seeking to outmaneuver his challenger.

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