

New Governments in Israel and the Palestinian Authority: Collapse of Israeli Unity, Return of Arafat Old-Timers

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Brief Analysis

Israel is reconfiguring its government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) has established a new cabinet this week. The Israeli-Palestinian violence of the last two years is unlikely to be transformed into a peace process as a result of this week's developments. This is due to a variety of factors ranging from the fact that PA chairman Yasir Arafat beat back efforts by reformers made over the summer and pointedly dropped his security chief who professed a commitment to reform. On the Israeli track, the new Israeli government's room to maneuver will be constrained by the lack of change on the Palestinian side, as well as a set of domestic and foreign considerations.

New Government in Israel: Policy Challenges and Constraints

Labor's departure from the Sharon government, coupled with Sharon's decision to form a narrow coalition, raises questions about the new direction of the Israeli government. The new government will face challenges, but there will also be multiple constraints that will prevent it from making radical changes in policy.

The challenges to the new coalition will come in different forms. They range from the small parties within the coalition that will be emboldened to press demands for additional settlement funding, to Palestinian terror groups that may launch powerful terror attacks to provoke the retaliation that this new government will employ. These challenges may, in turn, undermine Israeli standing abroad.

These provocative challenges are real, but so are the constraints on Sharon's choices of action. First, a key constraint for him is time. In the best scenario he has up to a year before he faces the Israeli voter, but he could easily face elections within months. A sharp shift to the right would alienate the Israeli center that traditionally decides elections. Moreover, a move to placate the middle will become even more important for Sharon if Binyamin Ben-Eliezer loses Labor party leadership to either of his dovish rivals, Haim Ramon or Amram Mitzna. These two have

made clear that they will not join a post-election unity government with Likud. Thus, deprived of a Labor counterweight, Sharon will need to embody the center. Heavy spending on settlements will be unpopular with a public facing an austerity budget that includes sharp cuts in social spending. According to Yediot Ahronot poll last week, 78 percent of Israelis believe some settlements will be evacuated as part of a peace deal.

Second, Sharon sees his relationship with President George W. Bush as a key achievement of his tenure. During White House meetings, he has promised Bush that Israel will avoid actions that could complicate a possible U.S. attack against Iraq, and repeatedly pledged that he would not harm Arafat. Sharon did this not as a favor to the United States, but because he sees Iraq as one of Israel's most implacable foes. This achievement is one that can be appreciated outside traditional sources of Likud supporters. A Likud government will not necessarily be any more trigger-happy in dealing with Iraq than would a broader government. In 1991, it was a narrow Likud government led by Yitzhak Shamir that exercised restraint despite being hit by thirty-nine Scud missiles. Any retaliation by Sharon is likely to occur as a result of a myriad of factors, ranging from the amount of casualties, the type of attack (conventional or unconventional), the advice of the Israeli Defense Forces, and consultation with the United States. Party ideology may be a factor, but it is unlikely to be decisive.

Third, the possibility of a looming war with Iraq, combined with two years of ongoing Palestinian-Israeli violence and Bush's June 24 call for new Palestinian leadership, all have made a peace process unlikely at this stage, irrespective of this week's political developments in Israel. In practical terms, the combination of the three will mean that a Sharon government will not fracture in the coming months as a result of an American diplomatic initiative.

Hani al-Hassan: Arafat's Pick for "Reformist" Interior Minister

Yesterday, Yasir Arafat announced the formation of a new PA cabinet, which promptly received a fifty-six to eighteen vote of confidence from the Palestinian Legislative Council. The composition of this cabinet is strikingly similar to the list Arafat was forced to withdraw under threat of parliamentary rejection last month. The most important and visible change is the nomination of Hani al-Hassan as minister of interior. In nominating al-Hassan, Arafat sacked Abdul Razak al-Yahya, who, during his five months on the job, reportedly earned Arafat's ire for being brazen enough to speak out against the ideology of terror that had permeated aspects of the intifada, and to demand real accountability within the security forces and to take critical first steps to amalgamate the panoply of security services under his control.

Al-Hassan, one of the few remaining founders of Fatah still active in politics, is one of Arafat's closest and longest-serving associates. A member of the Fatah Central Committee (FCC) and an early supporter of the idea of a single, democratic, secular state of Palestine, al-Hassan has been at Arafat's side from the days of Black September and the siege of Beirut and has long held the "foreign affairs portfolio" within the Fatah movement. He is one of three brothers prominent in Palestinian affairs: the late Khalid al-Hassan, a leader of Fatah who was at one time considered a possible successor to Arafat, and a younger brother Bilal al-Hassan who is a columnist in the Arab media. Al Hassan has, in recent times, been employed by Arafat as a personal envoy to foreign capitals; as a talking horse for political initiatives; as key player in resolving differences between Fatah and radical opposition organizations (both secular nationalist, including the PFLP and Hamas); and also as a loyal companion (Hassan was one of the most senior officials to remain with Arafat in Mukata through the recent Ramallah siege). Interestingly, he voted against the Oslo Accords when it was debated at the FCC in 1993. That, however, did not stop him from eventually joining Arafat in Gaza and serving throughout the Oslo period in the capacity of "senior advisor."

Along with reappointed finance minister Salam Fayyad, Hani al-Hassan will be center stage for the Palestinian reform effort. As envisioned by international donors (including the members of the Quartet), as well as the Palestinian reformers, reform includes: the consolidation of PA security services, retraining under international supervision, resumption of security cooperation with Israel under the framework of the Tenet work plan and, within

a year, the confiscation of illegal weapons and the dismantling of illegal militias operating within Palestinian jurisdiction.

Given his closeness to Arafat, it is virtually impossible to imagine al-Hassan taking any steps that are not approved by Arafat. And given his longstanding support of the concept of Palestinian national unity, i.e. a preference for accommodation of radical organizations rather than confrontation, it is virtually impossible to imagine al-Hassan leading the fight for weapons confiscation and the dismantling of terrorist infrastructure. By appointing al-Hassan, Arafat has effectively told the international community, particularly the Quartet, that he will not be marginalized by the reform process; he will control it. Indeed, al-Hassan's appointment is, at its core, a slap in the face to security reform.

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