

# Sharon's Victory: Implications for the Peace Process and U.S. Policy

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## Brief Analysis

**M**eaning of the ElectionThe Israeli people spoke in the most dramatic and convincing fashion. Viewed in the U.S. context, Ariel Sharon won a larger share of the vote 62.5 percent than any presidential candidate in history. Essentially, Israel voted to express one word: "enough!" enough violence, enough concessions, enough perception of weakness. They were particularly voting against Barak, both personally and against the policies that characterized his government (dating not only to Camp David but as far back as the earliest days of his cabinet). Certainly, much of yesterdays vote was against Barak more than it was a vote for Sharon; just as Baraks 1999 landslide was less a vote for him than it was a vote against Bibi Netanyahu; just as Netanyahus 1996 squeaker was less a vote for him than it was a vote against Shimon Peres. Now its Sharons turn.

What will Sharon do? His top mandate is to instill a sense of calm, bring about an end to violence, and make Israelis feel more secure. We should not kid ourselves Sharon was elected both to do what Ehud Barak did not do and not to do what Ehud Barak did do. In practical terms, this means he was elected to convince, and if necessary compel, the Palestinians to end violence, and not to pay for any lessening of violence in the coin of territorial or other concessions in the peace negotiations. For Sharon, the sequence is clear an end to violence is a prerequisite to a return to negotiations. To do this, Sharon is likely to try to apply different tactics than Barak; that may mean he will focus on applying "pressure that doesnt bleed" and that doesnt make for good pictures an emphasis on closures rather than military force, for example. However, depending on the level and form of violence, Sharons policy may entail actions that include deploying greater force than that used in the recent past.

What will Sharon not do? He will not negotiate a final status agreement. It is important not to keep alive fantasies that some Sharon-led national-unity government will pick up where the Taba negotiations left off, as the Haaretz newspapers lead editorial today suggested. That will not happen.

Between Gaza and BeirutFor a U.S. administration, the most urgent question will be: Does Sharon view Gaza and Ramallah in 2001 to be the latter-day equivalent of Beirut in 1982? That is, does Sharon consider that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is "Fatahland," a terrorist lair that needs to be destroyed or alternatively, does he believe that the PA needs taming, reining in, fixing, perhaps even pacifying, but not destroying? In this context, it is important to note

trends inside the PA:

The PA has regrettably become "infected with the Lebanon virus," as Zeev Schiff has said, characterized by the flying of Hizballah flags, the spirit of martyrdom, the breakdown of political life, corruption, street justice, and the spread of petty political fiefdoms.

A key event in recent developments was last weekends announcement by Palestine National Council (PNC) speaker Salim Zaanoun of a Commission of National Independence, an initiative heralding a reformist/Fatah-focused purge of the PA, designed to merge the official PA establishment and the unofficial Tanzim establishment. The goal seems to be to revitalize the PA, marginalize people associated with the peace process and the disastrous management of PA institutions in recent years, and to build new national unity around a more hard-line base. (This included a statement by Zaanoun that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) charter is not, in fact, annulled a statement not repudiated by Yasir Arafat or PLO leaders.) Zaanoun does not exist in a vacuum; he is, and has always been, Arafats man.

Against this background, is Gaza the Beirut of 2001? The answer is no not yet at least. Sharon is not out to destroy the PA but to find a way to change the dynamic of IsraeliPalestinian, and IsraeliArab, relations. The process could be painful, but it is a very different process than a process of undermining the PA, hastening its collapse, or shipping its leaders back to Tunis. But could the PA turn itself into the Beirut of 2001? Yes, if Palestinians take the wrong lesson from Sharons victory and decide that now is the time to capitalize on Sharons terrible international reputation by opening the jails, letting the bombs explode, unleashing gunfire on Jerusalem neighborhoods, and pursuing a guerilla war against Israel. Under those circumstances, Sharon will respond, probably using far more than the tiny fraction of firepower that Barak used in his efforts to quell the violence.

Why isnt Gaza the contemporary equivalent of 1982 Beirut for Sharon? Some propose the "changed man thesis" that Sharon today is a different Sharon from 1982, that he has mellowed with age, that he has been validated by the election, that he now has the opportunity to achieve statesman status and that, as a result, he is more open, less overbearing, more pragmatic, and less dogmatic. Whether or not people change, it is clear that circumstances change, and the circumstances today are very different from what they were in 1982.

The major difference is summed up in what different people mean when they say "Oslo is dead." On one level, key elements of Oslo have been overtaken by events the timetable of negotiations, the infrastructure of cooperation, district coordinating offices, joint patrols, dozens of joint committees, etc. But three key elements of Oslo are part of the firmament of the Middle East: 1) IsraeliPalestinian mutual recognition, including within it the Palestinian promise to end violence and commit to negotiations as the sole means to resolve conflicts; 2) the understanding that the setting for the solution to the Palestinian issue is within the West Bank and Gaza, not in Jordan, as Sharon once proposed; and 3) the creation of the PA as the proto-government of a likely future Palestinian state. No political leader in Israel today Ariel Sharon included disputes these realities any longer.

U.S. PolicySo far, the Bush administration has made an admirable effort at staying out of the Israeli election, at diminishing the level of presidential involvement, and at avoiding statements and actions which could impose themselves upon a very sensitive situation. This should not be viewed as disengaging from ArabIsraeli issues, as some people have suggested; it is different, not less. Of course, the hard part has not yet begun.

Operationally, the lead recommendations of The Washington Institutes Presidential Study Group report remain valid, perhaps more so today than when it was issued three weeks ago: These are 1) prevent a descent to war; 2) work to end violence; 3) reassess Oslo while exploring alternative paths to peace.

Preventing WarRegardless of the outcome of yesterdays vote, the prospect of regional conflict and even war has risen to a level unseen since the Gulf War. The United States government needs to take urgent measures to make

that less likely. Take, for example, the Israel-Syria-Lebanon triangle. Sharon was a supporter of unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, although perhaps for different reasons than Barak. Sharon also supported the post-withdrawal policy of deterrence through the promise of overwhelming retaliation enunciated by Barak and implicitly endorsed by Washington. Barak never implemented it; if provoked, Sharon would be more likely to take action, perhaps against Syrian assets. Given the unpredictability of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad who has revelled in the actions of Hizballah and is engaged in a dangerous minuet with Saddam Husayn the prospect of serious escalation is not small. That is why now is the time for preventive diplomacy to energize the UN to seek full implementation of Security Council Resolution 425, including the deployment of Lebanese troops to the south; to work with the Europeans to compel the Lebanese to abandon what the latter call a "policy of restraint," an Orwellian term for failing to prevent terrorists from operating on their soil, and to warn Syria about the prospect of massive retaliation.

**Ending Violence** The United States has a role to play to cushion and perhaps prevent the upsurge in violence that many fear. After all, Washington helped resurrect Arafat over the past seven years; the U.S. has standing to be much firmer in our dealings with him than we were over the course of the last five months. If the administration does not take the initiative on this, Congress is likely to do it on its own. At the same time, there is much preventive diplomacy that needs to be done with the Arabs. One key date will be the Arab League summit which will meet in Amman in March, just after Sharon forms his government. It is vital that the summit not take any operational measures e.g., on boycotts, suspensions of relations, etc. that will force a reaction from Sharon.

**Reassessing Oslo, Exploring Alternatives** As a first order of business, the administration needs to make sure that the region has no illusions about the Clinton proposals. Despite subtle ways of indicating that the new administration has no intention of advocating these ideas, some in the region still believe that these remain the basis of U.S. peace process policy. (See, for example, the current issue of the Jerusalem Report, which claims that Secretary of State Colin Powell has hinted his support for these proposals.) The reality is that unless the Bush team is somehow wedded to these ideas, it needs to send clear and unmistakable signals that they are no longer operative, that in Clinton's own words they left office with him. If not, then Sharon will take measures to render them irrelevant. That does not mean there can be no peace process with Sharon. In fact, there are a range of options: two Palestinian options, a Syria option and a regional option.

**Palestinian Option 1:** A negotiated, partial agreement Sharon calls this a "long-term non-belligerency with aspects of permanence." If combined with substantial contiguity and economic initiatives, then this could be a major step forward.

**Palestinian Option 2:** "coordinated unilateralism" a series of tacit arrangements that permit peaceful disengagement between the two sides, creation of Palestinian statehood within limited borders and the establishment of an uneasy but working relationship.

Neither option is filled with glory; both are messy. But both might be just what the process needs after the surrealism of the last few months.

**The Syria Option:** This tantalizes many people, in Washington and in the Middle East, given that the parties were reportedly so close to agreement in Spring 2000. However, it is highly uncertain that any of the basic dynamics have changed to the point that an agreement is more likely today than it was a year ago. However, it may be worth a try, although it should not come at the expense of dealing directly with Palestinian issues.

**The Regional Option:** Both the Bush team and some of Sharon's advisors have spoken of the need to place the peace process within the wider regional context. There could be a convergence of interests, including among those U.S. Arab allies who are fearful that Israeli-Palestinian violence could spiral out of control, to convene something akin to a Madrid II peace conference. The key to this effort would be to devise a conference from which all parties would stand

to benefit, at least in some way.

The point of this exercise is to underscore the fact that there is much diplomacy that can be done. In addition, there will be many other items on the U.S.-Israel agenda. These range from thorny issues, like dealing with settlement activity; to alliance-reinforcing issues, like cooperation on missile defense; to issues that could go either way, such as how the parties work with each other and with others in the region concerning regional strategic challenges such as Iraq, Iran, proliferation and whether the new Israeli government decides to revive the Phalcon sale or confirm Baraks suspension of the sale.

The first step is to talk with Sharon. He will be coming to Washington in mid-March, just around the time his government will be formed. President Bush should invite him to the White House now. Other Middle East leaders such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Jordans King Abdullah will not be far behind. All this shows that while George W. Bush may not choose to "do" Middle East politics, he will be forced to do it very soon.

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