

Ariel Sharon's Legacy

 [washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/ariel-sharons-legacy](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/ariel-sharons-legacy)

Peter Berkowitz

January 16, 2006

THE POST-SHARON ERA began abruptly on January 5, when the 77-year-old prime minister of Israel suffered a massive stroke while visiting his beloved ranch in the northern Negev. By the time Sharon reached the hospital, the bleeding in his brain had already made a return to government for the true Comeback Kid of Israeli politics all but inconceivable. In a bid to assure continuity and stability, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, sworn in that evening as interim prime minister, promised that the March 28 elections will take place as scheduled. Sharon, at the head of his new centrist party Kadima, had been expected to prevail decisively.

The Israeli public is saddened, and uncertain about the political fallout, but the newly emergent and electorally powerful Israeli center, which Sharon almost single-handedly brought into being over the last five years, feels particularly bereft. Meanwhile, the Bush administration has been deprived of its most loyal ally in the Middle East. And moderate Palestinians have lost a pragmatic Israeli leader with whom, bitter as the pill may have been to swallow, they learned they could work. That Sharon had made himself indispensable to the reasonable hopes for security and peace of Israelis, Americans, and Palestinians testifies to the achievement of this figure who, before the rise of George W. Bush, surely held the title of world's most hated leader.

Indeed, it is difficult to exaggerate the worldwide loathing of Ariel Sharon. In the European and Arab press it has been common to find Sharon reviled as a mass murderer of Palestinians in 2002 at the Jenin refugee camp; blamed for instigating the second intifada by gratuitously visiting the Temple Mount in September 2000; excoriated as a chief architect and relentless advocate of an imperialist Israeli settlement policy; held directly responsible for the 1982 massacre of Palestinian Arabs by Lebanese Christians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps on the outskirts of Beirut (for which he was charged in a Belgian court in June 2001 with crimes against humanity); and routinely compared to, and caricatured as, Adolf Hitler.

Nor was hatred of Sharon in short supply in Israel. Before he was elected prime minister in February 2001, no figure on the right aroused greater antipathy among left-of-center Israelis. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, you would have been hard pressed to find more than a handful of members of the intellectual and cultural elite--kibbutzniks, journalists, university professors, lawyers, and doctors--who could mention Sharon's name without having their faces disfigured by disgust.

Sharon's transformation into the indispensable statesman represented an amazing turn of events. A brilliant and always controversial star of the Israeli military, he joined the Haganah in 1942 at age 14, commanded an infantry company in 1948 in the War of Independence, and, as head of the famous "101" commando unit, made his name in the 1950s by leading daring counterterrorism raids into Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. He cemented his reputation in 1967 as a general commanding an armored division in the Six Day War that raced across the Sinai to the Suez Canal, and again in 1973 commanding a division in the Yom Kippur War that crossed the canal and enabled Israeli forces to surround the Egyptian Third Army, leaving only empty road between Sharon and Cairo.

By the mid-1980s, Sharon had become the most divisive figure in Israeli politics and the symbol to the left of the bellicose Jewish nationalism that they despised in the right. The Likud party was in power but not in control of the situation. Having destroyed the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure in the South of Lebanon in Operation Peace for the Galilee, Israeli troops became mired in that country. In 1983, the government-appointed Kahan Commission determined that Sharon bore "indirect responsibility" for the Sabra and Shatila massacres, forcing Sharon to resign as minister of defense. Had you told an Israeli at that time--on the right or on the left--that one day the disgraced general would become prime minister and would unite right and left in the country to an unprecedented degree, you would have been laughed out of court. Indeed, you would have been laughed out of court had you made that claim as recently as February 2000, a year before the Israeli electorate rallied around Sharon in record numbers.

Yet at a time of national crisis, following the last gasp of the Oslo Accords with the collapse of the peace process in the summer of 2000, and the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, Sharon was elected prime minister with the largest margin of victory in Israel's history. Upon assuming office in March 2001, he promptly broke the back of the ultra-orthodox parties that had long maintained a paralyzing veto on government policy, forming instead a coalition with the center left. And Sharon provided room for his fierce rival, Minister of the Treasury Benjamin Netanyahu, to institute dramatic free market reforms designed to overcome the stifling grip of state-run labor unions, heavy taxation, and a centralized economy--holdovers from Israel's European socialist roots.

BUT SHARON MADE HIS MOST ENDURING MARK on Israeli politics by presiding over the formation of a powerful new consensus on national security. The need for a new approach became evident in the fall of 2000 when Yasser Arafat launched the second intifada. Choosing war instead of either the generous concessions that Prime Minister Ehud Barak had offered at Camp David in the summer of 2000 or further negotiations, Arafat at long last managed to convince a sizable segment of the Israeli left that he could never be trusted as a partner in peace. The decision on the part of many of these stunned and chastened Israelis to vote for Sharon, or not vote for Barak, reflected their desire for a wartime leader. But, as the war unfolded, the systematic use by the Palestinians of suicide bombers to terrorize

civilians impelled Sharon to see something new as well: The dream of a Greater Israel, in which Israel ruled over West Bank and Gazan Palestinians, was inconsistent with Israel's long-term security interests.

This recognition informed Sharon's decision to build the security fence separating Israel from the West Bank (a fence protecting Israel from Gaza was already in place). The idea of a fence, running more or less along the Green Line (the 1949 armistice boundaries separating Israel from the West Bank, then held by Jordan, and the Sinai and Gaza, then held by Egypt), came from the left. Those on the right were loath to cut off the towns and cities that Israel, to a significant extent under Sharon's direction, had built after 1967 beyond the Green Line. Sharon's embrace of the fence in 2002, at the height of the Palestinian suicide bombing campaign, was a turning point, both in the war itself and in the emergence of Israel's new security consensus. Where the security fence has been completed (contrary to typical reports in the press, only about 5 percent of the barrier is a wall, and then either to protect against snipers, or to save space and spare residential dwellings), it has substantially reduced the number of successful suicide bombings.

In addition, Operation Defensive Shield, ordered by Sharon in the spring of 2002 after a Hamas suicide bomber killed 29 and injured 140 at a Passover seder in a Netanya hotel, cleared out terrorist havens in West Bank refugee camps. And Sharon's policy of taking the war to the enemy through targeted killing of terrorist leaders further threw the various Palestinian terrorist organizations into disarray. Well before Arafat died in November 2004, it was clear that Sharon had led Israel to victory in Arafat's suicide bomber war.

Sharon's new thinking culminated in his announcement in December 2003 of plans for unilateral disengagement from Gaza and large parts of the West Bank. This was not meant to nullify the Road Map to which Israel had agreed in 2002, at the urging of the Bush administration, but rather to declare that Israel could not wait indefinitely for the Palestinian Authority to meet its obligations under the Road Map to disarm the terrorists.

Sharon warned Israelis of "painful concessions." And indeed, the removal of 9,000 Israelis from their homes and farms on a narrow strip of land on the edge of Gaza in the summer of 2005 did convulse Israeli politics. But just as he supervised as defense minister the evacuation of the Israeli-built Sinai town of Yamit in 1981 in fulfillment of Israel's obligations under the peace treaty with Egypt, so Sharon, despite the rupture that it created in his own party, saw disengagement from Gaza through to the end. His actions put Palestinians, for the first time in their history, in charge of governing themselves.

And yet it is not because the old man went soft, or succumbed to a desire for world approbation, or finally acquired a humanitarian conscience, that the father of the settlements initiated withdrawal first from Gaza and eventually from most of the West Bank. Sharon never departed from his fundamental tenet: Israel's security comes first. And he was the man to determine and implement Israel's security requirements. For 30 years, Sharon believed that

Israel's security was best served by Israeli settlements criss-crossing the West Bank. As prime minister he saw that in light of changing demographic realities and the savagery of Palestinian terrorism, Israel's security was better served by disengagement.

Perhaps the soldier-statesman can be faulted for not taking the plight of the Palestinian people to heart. But, whatever mysteries Sharon's heart harbors, such is the cunning of history that he became the first Israeli prime minister to openly endorse a Palestinian state.

Perhaps he can be criticized for failing to groom a suitable successor. But he certainly broke a severe logjam in Israeli politics, empowered the electorate to see the shape of a hardheaded, reasonable, pragmatic politics, and set the stage for the next generation of leaders to seize the moment and show what they are made of.

And perhaps he can be taken to task for failing to appreciate all of the opportunities provided by the gentler ways of diplomacy and negotiation. But the diplomats and negotiators now have an independent Palestinian Authority operating out of the Gaza Strip to deal with, as well as the outlines of a plan for withdrawing from most of the West Bank, thanks to Sharon's leadership.

SHARON HAS ALWAYS BEEN A FIGHTER--cocksure, courageous, charming, defiant, quick-tempered, duplicitous, amazingly resilient, and, above all, steadfastly focused on Israel's security. The story is told that in the 1950s, when he led the "101" commando unit, Sharon would, just before an operation began, order his communications aide to keep a certain distance so that if orders from headquarters to cease and desist arrived, they could not be relayed to him. The stories of Sharon keeping the law at a convenient distance could be multiplied. Perhaps no Israeli military officer was reprimanded more or subject to more commissions of inquiry than Sharon. At the same time, Sharon commanded the loyalty of his men, was admired for his warmth and sense of humor, and for 60 years' performed deeds, in and out of uniform, essential to protecting Israel from enemies sworn to its destruction.

Sharon is the last of the 48ers--think of Yitzhak Rabin, Ezer Weizman, Moshe Dayan--to occupy the commanding heights of Israeli politics. He belonged to the generation that was born and bred in Israel, that came of age loving the land and fighting in the War of Independence, that was proud of the Zionist dream, that fought hard and lived large, and that, after heroic military careers, governed the nation well into its sixth decade. The 48ers were not always the best of democrats, especially Sharon. And yet time after time, they, and Sharon in particular, rose up to defend their small, surrounded, war-torn, beautiful country, making it possible for Jews to build a free and democratic state in their ancestral homeland.

Peter Berkowitz teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. He is the editor of *The Future of American Intelligence*.

