

# Israel After Sharon . . .

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February 6, 2006

## *Tel Aviv*

IT HAS BEEN, as usual, another eventful week in Israel. On January 24, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert--poised to lead his party Kadima (Forward), founded only months ago by the stricken Ariel Sharon, to a decisive victory in the upcoming March 28 national elections--gave his first major public address. Two days later, in their first elections in ten years, Palestinians repudiated their corrupt and despotic Fatah-led government and gave the militant Islamic group Hamas--branded a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States, and Europe, and openly dedicated to Israel's destruction--a decisive majority of 76 seats in their 132-seat parliament.

Hamas's landslide victory--an outcome largely unanticipated not only by Israel but also apparently by Hamas--presents Olmert with the first crisis of his government, and of his campaign. After a special meeting with his national security advisers, he announced late Thursday that he would not talk with a Hamas government. Many difficult questions loom: Will Hamas unleash a new round of terror? Will the international community now cut off its massive transfer of funds to the Palestinian Authority? Will Fatah join the government or remain in opposition? Will the responsibility for ruling and delivering services work to domesticate Hamas? At what pace will Israel proceed with unilateral disengagement? In formulating policies to deal with these difficult questions, Olmert is fortunate that his overall outlook is supported by a new public consensus, a consensus that is closely connected to successful Israeli leadership and failed Palestinian leadership.

An old friend's opinion, delivered four days before the Palestinian elections, is telling: "The Palestinians only understand the language of strength. I don't think we will have peace with them until the army reenters Gaza and the West Bank with tanks and planes and crushes the terrorists." This caught me somewhat by surprise. It's not that there haven't been many voices in Israel over the years expressing grim judgments of this sort. Or that the grim judgment lacks grounds. But this voice was coming from the left, from a former kibbutznik, a medical doctor and a man of peace.

We were visiting the kibbutz where he grew up, on the edge of the Negev, next to the Gaza Strip (hundreds of Hamas's Kassam missiles have fallen here), chatting in the chilly Shabbat evening air, at a birthday party for the 93-year-old matriarch of the family. She was surrounded by her five children, some 15 to 20 grandchildren, and another 15 or so great grandchildren. One of the grandchildren, and himself a new father, my friend was confident that the new Kadima party would survive the prime minister's incapacitation. Indeed, in the

weeks since Sharon's stroke, Kadima has slightly increased its commanding lead in the polls, which now indicate that in two months' time it is likely to win more than twice as many seats as either Labor or Likud.

This makes sense, my friend tells me, because Kadima's ascendance reflects profound changes in the Israeli public. On national security, a substantial group of voters on the right, following Sharon, has abandoned the idea of an Israeli future that involves ruling over Palestinians. And a substantial group of voters on the left, if they have not abandoned the idea of finding a negotiating partner among the Palestinians, has at least acquired an intense skepticism about the prospects. At the same time, many voters on the left have rejected Labor's statist principles and have embraced the need for free market reforms. While they would soften the severe fiscal discipline initiated by the Sharon government, they are determined to continue with privatization.

In short, Kadima has arisen out of the union of pragmatic, center-leaning conservatives who have broken off from the most doctrinaire members of Likud, and pragmatic, center-leaning liberals who have broken off from the most doctrinaire members of Labor. This pivotal development should not be confused with the overhyped Third Way of Tony Blair or Bill Clinton. There the emphasis was on top-down theoretical innovations and the formulation of policies designed to cobble together transitory majorities. What Sharon wrought, however, was something solid: the formulation of principles on national security and economic policy that both reflected his own considered judgment on Israel's most urgent needs and, after almost three decades in which his country was in the grips of ideology-driven politics, gave expression as well as shape to a vital Israeli center. But will this emergent center hold?

The just concluded Sixth Annual Herzliya Conference on National Security illustrated the center's growing power. Israeli academics, business people, journalists, politicians, and national security figures, along with distinguished visitors from abroad, gathered this week several miles north of Tel Aviv for three 14-hour-days of panels and speeches on topics ranging from the Iranian nuclear threat to the rule of law and the inclusion of Arab citizens of Israel in the country's social and political life. The conference's nonstop debate itself is testimony to the vibrancy of democracy in Israel. But it was the featured dinner speeches of Likud candidate for prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Labor candidate Amir Peretz, and Kadima candidate and Acting Prime Minister Olmert that were most revealing.

Neither Netanyahu on Sunday night nor Peretz on Monday night broke new ground or defied expectations, though both showed an appreciation of the need to give the center its due. The former Likud prime minister--slick, smart, and well-spoken--indicated that he is prepared to remove illegal settlements in the West Bank and to make territorial concessions. Former union leader Peretz seemed small, nervous, and not yet ready for prime time leadership. While he expressed optimism about finding a Palestinian negotiating partner, he also declared his readiness, if all else fails, to disengage unilaterally.

Olmert's Tuesday night speech was highly anticipated. A career politician in a country where it is thought particularly unseemly to make a career out of politics, the 60-year-old Olmert was first elected to the Knesset in 1973 and served as mayor of Jerusalem for 10 years (1993-2003). Olmert, like Sharon, was for most of his public life an outspoken proponent of West Bank settlements. But Olmert also became closely identified with the national security policies Sharon adopted as prime minister. Indeed, Olmert was the first conservative and first member of Sharon's cabinet to come out with the idea of disengagement. Subsequently, Olmert collaborated with Sharon on the historic December 2003 Herzliya address in which Sharon announced the disengagement plan. But could the sharp-tongued, quick-tempered career politician fill the shoes of the daring former general who, as prime minister, as on the battlefield throughout his two-and-a-half-decades-long military career, boldly and repeatedly seized the initiative?

In fact, Olmert delivered his speech with conviction and prime-ministerial gravity. And he said what he needed to say. He paid tribute to Sharon and affirmed his intention to continue on "the path of Sharon." He declared that Israel must maintain a Jewish majority by relinquishing control over large parts of the West Bank and establishing clear boundaries, while keeping Jerusalem united under Israeli sovereignty, holding onto the largest Jewish settlement blocs, and establishing security zones. He committed himself to "full implementation" of the U.S.-sponsored Road Map, which calls for the Palestinians to abandon terror in exchange for which Israel will enter into negotiations for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. And while touting the achievements of economic reform--a 5.2 percent growth rate in 2005 (higher than the United States or Europe), reduced unemployment, record levels of foreign investment--Olmert stressed the urgency of lifting up the poor. He would do this not in the old way, through aggressive redistribution, but by expanding opportunity, starting with a restructuring of the educational system.

Moreover, Olmert's Herzliya address contained three remarkable passages that went well beyond what he needed to say. The first affirmed the Jewish right to the historic land of Israel, while emphasizing the moral and political necessity of imposing painful restrictions on the exercise of that right:

The existence of a Jewish majority in the State of Israel cannot be maintained with the continued control over the Palestinian population in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. We firmly stand by the historic right of the people of Israel to the entire Land of Israel. Every hill in Samaria and every valley in Judea is part of our historic homeland. We do not forget this, not even for one moment. However, the choice between the desire to allow every Jew to live anywhere in the Land of Israel [and] the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish country--obligates relinquishing parts of the Land of Israel. This is not a relinquishing of the Zionist idea, rather the essential realization of the Zionist goal--ensuring the existence of a Jewish and democratic state in the Land of Israel.

The second represented the most forceful statement to date by an Israeli head of government that illegal settlements must cease and those in existence must be removed:

The Government of Israel will not be deterred by the threats of a minority of lawbreakers. The unauthorized outposts will be dismantled, and I have already given the appropriate instructions in this regard to our security forces and those entrusted with upholding the law. We will forcefully defend the values of the rule of law, even when attacked from within.

The third clearly connected Israel's national security to the achievement of liberty and democracy among Palestinians:

We are interested in neighborly relations which are good, productive and progressive. We support the establishment of a modern, democratic Palestinian state which respects civil rights, and is economically prosperous. Their welfare is our welfare, their well-being is our well-being, their stability is our stability.

Together, these statements--even the last, which is in no way inconsistent with acting forcefully to defend Israel's welfare and security from a terrorist state on its border--show an acting prime minister capable of articulating a clear-eyed pragmatic politics for a state that is both Jewish and a liberal democracy.

WILL IT BE ENOUGH? Particularly with a neighbor government run by Muslim extremists pledged to Israel's destruction? President Bush's statement at his Thursday morning Washington news conference--if your party has an armed wing and your platform calls for the destruction of Israel, you can't be a partner in peace--was welcome. Meanwhile, Netanyahu was quick to blame disengagement for creating what he called "Hamastan . . . a representative of Iran and in the image of the Taliban." And critics will treat Hamas's victory as further confirmation of the collapse of Bush's policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East.

In fact, Hamas's victory may strengthen Olmert's hand, and it can paradoxically but plausibly be seen as a vindication of the Bush liberty doctrine. Those Kadima voters who, like my friend, migrated to the party from the left will find in the Palestinian election results irrefutable confirmation of what drove them away from their old party in the first place: the conviction that in the short term Israel is unlikely to find a viable negotiating partner representing the Palestinian people and therefore must act unilaterally to establish defensible borders and separate from the Palestinian people. The danger that Kadima faces is that those who came to its ranks from the Likud may be tempted to return. But, in addition to Olmert, Kadima is led by Foreign and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, both ex-Likudniks and familiar faces. Furthermore, there is no good reason to suppose that Likud

voters who broke with their party to endorse a two-state solution, based if necessary on unilateral disengagement, will think, as the Likud today does, that the solution to the problem of Hamas involves exercising administrative control over the Palestinian people.

As for the Bush liberty doctrine, central to its application to the Middle East was the administration's crucial post-9/11 conclusion that, as the president put it, 50 years of coddling dictators in the region had produced neither stability nor security. However, the Bush administration declined to apply, or failed to effectively apply, this principle to Yasser Arafat and his successor Mahmoud Abbas. Since 1995, Washington, the E.U., and the international community have given many billions of dollars to the Palestinian Authority. But what do the Palestinian people have to show for it? Alas, not homes, schools, hospitals, factories, or roads, the material infrastructure of democracy and peace. A huge proportion of the foreign aid has been stolen or frittered away by the Palestinian leadership. And experts in Israel are convinced that a huge proportion of those who voted Fatah out and Hamas in did so not because they favored war to the death with Israel but because they were sick and tired of being lied to and impoverished by their leaders. Nevertheless, for the time being the Palestinians and Israelis are stuck with committed terrorists at the helm of the Palestinian Authority. So Bush was right: Coddling Arafat and Abbas has heightened instability and insecurity in the Middle East.

Israel's next step depends in significant measure on what Hamas does with its newfound political power. Some are speculating that participation in the democratic process and shouldering the responsibilities of governing will soften Hamas. Several senior members of the Israeli national security community I spoke with are doubtful. Even though most of their electoral support may have come from people angry at Fatah about poverty, unemployment, and lack of social services, the defeat and destruction of Israel are not mere policy preferences for Hamas but cornerstones of its Islamist faith.

Nor of course is Hamas's resounding electoral success Israel's sole urgent national security threat. Ever since disengagement from Gaza was completed in the summer of 2005, increasing numbers of increasingly dangerous weapons have flowed across the border from Egypt and into the hands of a variety of terrorist groups that took up residence in Gaza on Fatah's watch. On Israel's northern border, Syria looks more and more like a failed state. On the threshold of producing a nuclear weapon in defiance of the international community and already possessing missiles capable of delivering them, Iran has an elected president who has declared the need to obliterate Israel from the map of the Middle East.

In these harsh circumstances, the least one can say is that a clear-eyed, pragmatic politics, shared by its acting prime minister and a plurality of the population, has arrived in Israel in the nick of time.

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