



## IN BRIEF

The election of controversial Likud leader Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel resulted more from the disillusionment of the left than the triumph of the right. Sharon's efforts to end the second intifada through stronger military responses are a recipe for escalation. The international community should support the recommendations of the Mitchell Committee, which proposes that the Palestinians renounce the use of violence as a tool in exchange for an Israeli reversal of punitive measures taken since the intifada began, accompanied by a freeze on further settlement growth.



# POLICY BRIEF

## Israel under Sharon: The Tunnel at the End of the Light by Alan Dowty

The Israeli election of 2001 was, and will remain, unique in that nation's electoral chronicles. It was called less than twenty-one months after the previous election, the shortest interval ever. It was the first time voters balloted only for a Prime Minister and not for a new Knesset (Parliament). Given the subsequent repeal of Israel's failed experiment with separate election of the Prime Minister, it will likely remain the last such occasion. It generated less enthusiasm, and a significantly lower turnout, than any previous election; most notably and most alarmingly, for the first time a vast majority of Israel's Arab citizens boycotted the proceedings.

### The 2001 Election in Perspective

The election must be seen in the perspective of the deterioration in the Arab-Israel conflict, and in Israelis' sense of security, since the high point of the Camp David summit of July 2000. During those heady days, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat, under the personal stewardship of U.S. President Bill Clinton, made the first serious face-to-face effort to resolve core Arab-Israeli issues since the conflict began over a century ago. Even when the effort fell short - hardly surprising when these complex issues had barely been touched upon during the previous nine years of the "peace process" - the two sides seemed closer to agreement than ever before. There was a sense of impending progress; there was light at the end of the tunnel.

The sense of shock was all the greater, therefore, when violence erupted at the end of September following the visit of controversial Likud leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, a site holy to both Judaism and Islam and a key point of contention in the Camp David failure. As the violence evolved into a second "intifada," inspired by the first sustained uprising of 1987-1991, it became clear the remaining gap on basic issues was wider than imagined, and - more importantly - that Palestinian grievances with the existing situation went deeper than Israelis, or the outside world generally, had imagined.

The interim agreements under the peace process had transferred 90 percent

of the Gaza strip and 42 percent of the West Bank, with close to 98 percent of their Palestinian residents (outside of Jerusalem), to the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Most Israelis felt that occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was all but over, and thus no longer a source of confrontation. But Palestinians saw the continuing Israeli presence, and especially the fragmentation of their territory by Israeli-held roads and continuing expansion of Israeli settlements in the heart of the West Bank, as evidence of Israeli intent to perpetuate the occupation.

This intifada had a different impact on Israeli opinion, however. In the late 1980s Israel had a hawkish government, there was no Israeli-Palestinian peace process, occupation was in full swing, and Palestinian protest had a generally populist character. The result was to discredit the occupation; Israeli opinion moved significantly in a dovish direction, laying the foundation for the peace process a short time later. This second intifada took place with an Israeli government that had offered more than any predecessor; it violated existing Israeli-Palestinian agreements; and it quickly degenerated into military firefights rather than popular protest. The result, for most Israelis, was to discredit the peace process itself.

Even before the intifada Prime Minister Barak had lost his Knesset majority because of concessions offered at Camp David. Barak had hoped to achieve a peace agreement that would restore his majority, if necessary through new elections.

The intifada produced the opposite result, pushing the electorate sharply to the right. By early November, Barak was living on borrowed time, and in a transparent maneuver he resigned in order to force a new election solely for Prime Minister (his strongest opponent, Benjamin Netanyahu, would not be eligible to run, and in any event a new Knesset would be more hawkish). Though the Knesset passed a new law enabling Netanyahu to run, he declined to do so without a new Knesset, leaving the “caretaker” leader of Likud, Ariel Sharon, as Barak’s opponent.

In view of his controversial history and extremist image, Sharon’s smashing victory over Barak was indeed astounding - but its significance needs to be put in perspective. The election was marked more by the demoralization and disillusionment of the left than by the triumph of the right; it was more of a vote against Barak - and against Arafat - than it was a vote for Sharon. This can be seen in a quick comparison of this election to the previous contest:

|                        |           | 1999            | 2000                   |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------------|
| <b>Eligible voters</b> |           | 4,285,428       | 4,504,769              |
| <b>Turnout</b>         |           | 79%             | 62%                    |
| <b>Results</b>         | Barak     | 1,791,020 (42%) | Barak 1,023,944 (23%)  |
|                        | Netanyahu | 1,402,474 (33%) | Sharon 1,698,077 (38%) |

As this demonstrates, Sharon received the support of only 5 percent more of eligible voters than Netanyahu earned in the previous election as a losing candidate; in

other words, he held the right-wing base that supported Netanyahu, with an incremental increase. The real story is the hundreds of thousands of 1999 Barak voters who could not bring themselves to vote for either candidate. Close to half of these were Arab voters who had supported Barak by an estimated 95-97% majority in 1999, but who had been alienated by his coolness toward the Arab sector and by the killing of 13 Israeli Arabs by Israeli police in the early days of the intifada. Arab turnout, normally above 70 percent and only slightly below Jewish turnout, fell to under 20 percent.

### The Sharon Government

But whatever the forces that brought it about, the result is an Israeli government headed by, arguably, the most hawkish Prime Minister in Israel’s history. While Ariel Sharon does not match Menachem Begin or Yitzhak Shamir in ideological commitment to territorial maximalism, his reputation for readiness to use military

force and for “creating facts” on the ground go beyond that of any of his predecessors. Sharon, more than any other single figure, may claim credit for the presence of close to 200,000

Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, and he has not yet indicated any willingness to evacuate a single settlement.

Sharon does, however, possess a pragmatic streak, demonstrated in his immediate move to broaden his base of power by establishing a government of national unity, offering generous concessions to the Labor party in order to gain their participation (including a commitment to establish no new settlements and permit only “natural growth” in existing ones). Far from pursuing a maximalist agenda, Sharon has promised to focus on the reality that brought him to power, ending the current state of violence and restoring a sense of security to Israel’s public - with special emphasis on the violence that has spilled over into Israel itself.

To do this, Sharon must have the cooperation of the Palestinian Authority, which cannot defeat Israel but can make Israelis live in a state of fear. There is debate within Israel over the effectiveness of measures such as closures and checkpoints that have caused widespread damage to the Palestinian population and have undermined the control of the PA, but have not prevented shootings or violent attacks. Sharon has indicated an intention to ease up on measures that punish the Palestinian public as a whole, while raising the level of military responses to military threats.

The problem is that this is a recipe for escalation under current circumstances. The PA leadership has clearly calculated that it cannot move toward a meaningful de-escalation, and test its uncertain control of militants within its own ranks, without a clear political gain in return (emphasis has shifted over

time from demands for internationalization to, more recently, a demand for freezing the “natural growth” of settlements). But the new Israeli government is committed with equal determination to the proposition that the violence must end without any “reward” to the Palestinians. Therefore, a testing of wills on both sides is likely in the months ahead, not to the point of a general war (none of the states in the area would welcome that) but to a level of violence that will test the capacity of each to endure pain. We are in the tunnel at the end of the light.

But the really painful aspect of this is that after it has played out, and both sides have agreed out of mutual exhaustion on a murky formula that will enable each to claim that the violence has ended on its terms, they will simply be back where they started. Neither has a military solution for the current impasse, nor for the basic issues that remain as they were left in January. At that point, it will become clear that the Sharon government has little to offer Palestinian negotiators on these basic issues; in recent interviews Sharon himself has reaffirmed his unwillingness to contemplate any further substantial Israeli withdrawals from the territories or to dismantle any Jewish settlements. It will take yet more time before we see the light at the end of that tunnel.

### What Needs to Happen

Even though the long-term prospects remain problematic with the current leadership of the two parties, the international community - and the United States in particular - do have a role to play in bringing the deterioration to a halt and moving matters in a positive direction. The first priority is to end the violence, which has ac-

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quired a dynamic of its own and effectively prevents consideration of other issues. In this respect, the recent recommendations of the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact Finding Committee - the Mitchell Committee - represent a consensual position that ought to receive the full support of outside parties.

Key to these recommendations are, on the Palestinian side, a clear and unequivocal renunciation of the use of violence as a tool, accompanied by actions consonant with this declaration, and from the Israeli side, a reversal of all punitive measures taken since the intifada began, together with a freeze on further settlement growth. This last point will be the most difficult, but it should now be clear that an end to settlement growth (not just to the establishment of new settlements) is the sine qua non for any serious future diplomacy.

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