

The Peace Process and the Israeli Elections

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After Ehud Barak and Labour defeated Binyamin Netanyahu in June 1999, Ariel Sharon was chosen by a demoralized Likud party as a temporary caretaker. Less than two years later, in a special election held in February 2001, Sharon defeated Barak to become prime minister, gaining record support exceeding 60 per cent of the vote. Sharon proceeded to build on this foundation, forming a national unity government (NUG), and after the coalition collapsed, triggering the general elections of 2003, Sharon led the Likud to a sweeping victory.

The key to this startling and far-reaching change in Israeli politics is clearly to be found in the catastrophic failure of the Oslo process and the Palestinian campaign of violence that followed. Indeed, foreign policy and issues related to the last phase of the Oslo negotiations dominated Israeli politics after 1999. The prominence of the peace process in Israeli politics is hardly a new phenomenon, but there has been a fundamental change in the way the public relates to the peace process. In the wake of the Six-Day War, Israelis increasingly came to believe that they were able to shape their relations with the Arab states and the Palestinians. As a result, the ideological debate over the future of the territories became a major part of the political discourse. In contrast, in the wake of the collapse of the Oslo process, the ideological divide over the peace process has been replaced by a growing consensus, as the Israeli public no longer believes that Israel has much ability to alter the fundamental positions of the Palestinians, at least in the short term. Overall, the results of the 2001 and 2003 elections – and the general consensus that they reflected – should not be seen as a temporary ripple, but rather as representing a transformation within Israeli politics. The focus on security and existential issues is likely to continue well beyond the second Sharon administration.

The trigger for these fundamental changes was provided in July 2000, following the failure of the ‘permanent status’ talks and the beginning of the violence that brought down the government of Ehud Barak. This provided Sharon with the opportunity he grasped. As prime minister

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and as head of a broad unity coalition, Sharon responded to the challenges facing Israel with skill, and his policies with respect to the conflict and relations with external powers (the US in particular) were largely consensus-based.

As a result, by the 2003 elections, positions on these issues had already largely crystallized among the vast majority of Israeli voters. In the campaign itself, the debate on security, responses to terrorism, and negotiations with the Palestinians were muted and secondary, with little impact on the results. The polls charted various ups and downs along the way for Likud and Labour (the electoral system had been returned to the old party list process, without a separate ballot for prime minister), but in the end their predictions at the start of the campaign were very close to the final results. The fluctuations in the polls were mainly related to the corruption scandals surrounding the Likud. However, for 35–40 per cent of the electorate, security was the key issue, as opposed to the only six per cent who thought corruption was the key issue.¹

As in the 2001 election for prime minister, the large swing away from Labour and the left to Likud and the right was primarily a vote of ‘no confidence’ in the Palestinians as partners for peace, especially the leader of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Yasser Arafat.² Although this conclusion might seem obvious and almost banal, the stark results can easily obscure the profound changes that have taken place in Israeli politics as a result of these events. For example, even most self-identifying supporters of the right now support the classic positions of the Israeli left such as support (or at least acceptance) of a Palestinian state, and the need to dismantle isolated settlements.³ Furthermore, since Sharon’s victory in 2001, Israel’s economic and security situation had deteriorated. Under ‘normal’ circumstances, these developments would have led to popular support for the opposition Labour party. Indeed, Labour leader Amram Mitzna went as far as employing a psychologist to try and understand why, despite everything, the voters continued to show strong support for Sharon and the Likud.⁴

However, the apparent ‘psychosis’ of the Israeli public can be explained quite rationally. First, while the public was aware of the Sharon government’s failure to generate a positive economic and security situation, they seemed to believe that his government was performing well under very difficult circumstances. Crucially for Sharon, the public strongly believed that others were responsible for those difficult circumstances. Over 80 per cent of Israelis thought the Palestinians were solely (49 per cent) or mostly (35 per cent) responsible for the continuation of the conflict. Around 70 per cent thought that the Palestinians in general did not want peace and that their true aim was to kill as many Jews as possible and conquer all of Israel, an increase of over 20 per cent on previous years.⁵ (Palestinian polls did indeed show that a plurality of Palestinians, 47 per cent, saw the goal of the violence as Israel’s destruction.⁶) In tandem, many Israelis adopted

a negative view of the whole Oslo peace process. Thus in August 2002, 48 per cent thought that Israel's situation would have been better if it had not entered the Oslo process, compared to 30 per cent who thought that it would have been worse. Even among those who voted for Ehud Barak in 2001, only 27 per cent reported that they still believed in the Oslo process.⁷ Since the Israeli left was strongly associated with the Oslo negotiations, its credibility on peace and security was severely damaged by these statistics. Indeed, the failure of Oslo dealt a massive blow to the Israeli left, from which it will take a long time to recover.

Second, although the public generally endorsed the ultimate destination mapped out by Oslo and the left, it was equally concerned with arriving at that destination safely and limiting the cost incurred in the interim. When the public was asked to identify the most important issue in the election, the security situation ranked in first place for 35–40 per cent of the electorate, more than double the second place answer – the economy.⁸ The Israeli left's victories in 1992 and 1999 were achieved by candidates with impeccable security credentials, former chiefs of staff Rabin and Barak, and both emphasized the security benefits of their policies. Following the collapse of the peace process in 2000, the public came to believe that a government led by Sharon was most likely to generate a secure path towards peace.⁹ Polls show that close to half of Israeli voters thought Sharon's policy towards the Palestinians was appropriate, while only 23 per cent thought Labour leader Amram Mitzna's policy was appropriate. Even 38 per cent of those who intended to vote Labour viewed Sharon's policy as appropriate.¹⁰

Here, Sharon's success rested on the transformation of his image in the eyes of the public from 'super-hawk' to a credible consensus candidate. He was assisted in this by his excellent relations with the Bush administration, which backed Sharon's policy of isolating Arafat. The image of previous Likud candidates had been damaged by clashes with the US over the peace process, as in the case of Shamir in 1992 and Netanyahu in 1999.

Sharon also succeeded in establishing his credibility as a consensus candidate by adopting a version of one of the left's major standing positions: acceptance of Palestinian statehood. In addition, Sharon began to implement the popular and bi-partisan demand for the construction of a separation fence between Israel and the Palestinians. On other potentially sensitive issues where his traditional position clashed with that of the public consensus – such as the questions related to settlement policy – he succeeded in blurring the issue by making vague references to his willingness to make 'painful compromises'.¹¹

Finally, the scale of Sharon's victory, if not the victory itself, was greatly assisted by the inability of the Israeli left to present an alternative policy that appeared viable to the majority of the public, especially centrists. Part of the problem was that the left was internally divided;

with the collapse of Oslo it had no unifying theme. Under the leadership of Gen. (Reserve) Binyamin 'Fuad' Ben-Eliezer, March 2001–October 2002, it was also difficult for Labour to formulate a credible alternative to Likud, since it was part of the same NUG. Later, having left the NUG, Mitzna tried to offer a clear-cut alternative to Likud. However, this platform was far too dovish for the Israeli public, and often confusing. Labour's move away from the centre to the left was confirmed in the public's mind by Mitzna's absolute refusal to sit in a NUG headed by Sharon, which contrasted unfavourably with Sharon's clear preference for a NUG including Labour.¹² Overall, the election confirmed the general rule of all elections since the start of the peace process in the 1990s: to win, candidates must present a mixture of 'peace and security' that is credible to the centrist swing element of the electorate.¹³ Sharon achieved this, Mitzna failed.

BARAK AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE PEACE PROCESS,
JUNE 1999–JANUARY 2001

In contrast to the left-wing architects of Oslo, Barak had always viewed the negotiations as a mixed blessing. The framework developed through the 1993 Declaration of Principles mandated Israeli territorial withdrawals in the interim phase before determining whether the Palestinians were prepared to compromise on core permanent status issues such as Jerusalem and refugees. The agreement thus left Israel open to 'salami tactics', whereby the Palestinians – having gained most of the territory – would be able to declare a state unilaterally¹⁴ and continue to demand fundamental concessions from Israel on core identity issues. In order to prevent this, Barak sought to restructure the Oslo framework by making the imminent third and final interim withdrawal (mandated under the 1995 'Oslo II' Interim Agreement) dependent on major progress towards a final status agreement. This was the basic idea behind the September 1999 Sharm el Sheik agreement that was the first major step taken by the new Barak government.

Barak subsequently turned his attention to the Syrian track, partly in order to create the conditions for the ultimate goal, which was a complete end to the Arab–Israeli conflict. After two days of talks in mid-December between Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk a-Shara, hosted by President Clinton at Blair House, the negotiating teams reconvened for a week of talks in early January at Shephardstown.¹⁵ President Clinton subsequently met President Assad in Geneva in March, and informed Assad of the Israeli offer. The offer consisted of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights to a line based on the pre-1967 border, which was more generous to Syria than the 1923 international border. Assad, however, rejected the offer outright, as it did not give Syria sovereignty over

the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, which it had illegally occupied in 1949.¹⁶

The collapse of peace talks with Syria and the mounting domestic pressure forced Barak to fulfil his promise of a withdrawal from Lebanon by June 2000. So, as Israel's ally, the South Lebanon Army, began to collapse, Barak opted to pull Israeli forces out of Lebanon entirely in a very quickly executed operation completed on 24 May.¹⁷ The Lebanese border was generally quiet after that, although there were attacks in the Sheba farms area, which Hizbollah claims as part of Lebanon in contravention of the official UN border demarcation.

The impact of the withdrawal reverberated on the Palestinian track, and had a particular impact on the secret permanent status discussions that had begun. With the approach of the one-year deadline for an agreement – established at the Sharm meeting – and with the Clinton presidency coming to an end, Barak pushed for a summit meeting. Barak was also aware of mounting signs of preparation for large-scale Palestinian violence.¹⁸ Ten days of rioting broke out on 15 May 2000, the day Barak pushed through the Knesset his plan to withdraw from three Palestinian villages adjacent to Jerusalem as a confidence building measure. The ostensible trigger came from demands that Israel release more Palestinian prisoners, and in these attacks the PA forces fired on Israeli soldiers for the first time since the Jerusalem tunnel clashes in 1996. In response, Barak suspended implementation of the withdrawal.

In July, prior to the beginning of the Camp David summit, centre-right coalition members – Shas, Yisrael B'Aliya and the National Religious Party – resigned from the coalition in protest over the positions Barak was planning to adopt in negotiations. At the same time, Barak's foreign minister, former Likud MK David Levi, refused to attend Camp David, citing the same reason. Two weeks earlier, the left-wing Meretz party withdrew from the government over a different issue involving Shas. Despite losing a no-confidence vote, Barak was able to continue as prime minister of a minority government, although he lacked a parliamentary majority for any agreement he might make even with the support of Meretz and the Arab parties outside the government.¹⁹ However, Barak had prepared for the disintegration of his coalition at the moment of truth, and he expected to gain sufficient public support in a referendum and new elections if he succeeded in negotiating a peace agreement.²⁰

Barak led the Israeli delegation, Arafat led the Palestinians, and Clinton led the US at the Camp David Summit on 11–25 July 2000, where they failed to forge the basis for a Permanent Status Agreement. The disagreement focused primarily on the highly symbolic identity issue of Jerusalem. Barak opened by offering a package including a Palestinian state in 88 per cent of the West Bank and all of Gaza, with Palestinian autonomy over the Arab sections of East Jerusalem and the surface of

the Temple Mount compound. Towards the end of the summit, Barak accepted the compromise put forward by President Clinton, according to which the Palestinians would receive 92 per cent and limited sovereignty in the Arab areas of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. However, Arafat rejected both Israeli and US proposals, while refusing to put forward an alternative plan of his own.²¹ The depth of the disagreement was revealed when Arafat even denied the historical link between Jerusalem and the Jewish people, including the existence of the Temple 2,000 years ago. Since Arafat had grown up very close to the Western Wall and was historically well informed, this position was seen as an effort to avoid any path that would lead to compromise on this central issue.²²

After Camp David, Barak laid the blame for failure squarely at the door of the Palestinians, declaring publicly that he had revealed 'the true face of Arafat'. Similarly, Clinton stated that the Palestinians were more responsible for the failure of the summit than Israel. Among other things, such statements served to bolster Barak's domestic political position, as did Barak's talk of forming a NUG with the Likud. In fact – and in contrast to the 1993–95 period – public opposition to Barak's unprecedented offer was very muted. However, support for Barak had begun to erode in the wake of the riots in May²³ (before the summit) and because of domestic political issues. Opposition increased, and despite Barak's declarations an additional 38 negotiating sessions were held between Israel and the Palestinians from the end of Camp David to the outbreak of violence in the PA at the end of September, a day after opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount.²⁴ (See a detailed discussion of this event below.)

Analyses and opinions differ on Arafat's role in initiating the violence. However, there is a consensus that he bears at least indirect responsibility for the outbreak of the violence due to his unwillingness to disarm paramilitary groups with illegal weapons, his shrill rhetoric that did not reflect the principles embodied in the Oslo process, and the generally corrupt and repressive nature of his regime, which fuelled the Palestinian public's sense of frustration.²⁵ Moreover, once the violence started it was clear that Arafat encouraged it,²⁶ including financing the Tanzim (Fatah affiliates loyal to Arafat) who were leading the violence, and releasing known Islamic terrorists from prison.²⁷ Arafat's refusal to make a clear public announcement in Arabic calling for an end to violence was coupled with his refusal to give an unambiguous order to the Tanzim following the cease-fire talks in Paris, Sharm El Sheik and with Shimon Peres. This pushed Barak towards giving up on the attempts to reach a framework agreement regarding permanent status issues and instead to consider forming a NUG in response to the violence.

By the end of October Barak and Sharon had reached an agreement in principle to form a government, as by this stage Barak's minority government was no longer able to survive alone. However, in the end Barak

opted instead to sign an agreement with Shas to provide the government with a 'safety net' that would prevent it from falling for a month. When this agreement came to an end, Barak called for direct elections for the prime minister, to be held in early February 2001. In the interim, the diplomatic pace picked up as the level of violence declined briefly.²⁸

On 23 December, less than a month before his term was to end, Clinton presented the parties with his plan for a framework agreement.²⁹ The framework was more comprehensive and embodied more Israeli concessions than any of the proposals put forward at Camp David. It gave the Palestinians 94–97 per cent of the West Bank, plus territorial compensation from Israeli territory that effectively gave the Palestinians the equivalent of 100 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza. On Jerusalem, the plan would divide the city on the basis of 'what is Jewish goes to Israel, what is Arab goes to the Palestinians'. In other words, the Palestinians would have gained full sovereignty over the East Jerusalem sections that were populated primarily by Arabs. The plan also placed the surface of the Temple Mount under full Palestinian sovereignty, with joint approval required for excavations. Regarding the critical issue of Palestinian refugees, Clinton spoke of a 'two states for two peoples' solution in which there would be no specific right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel itself, but a right of return to a historic Palestine/Palestinian homeland. Israeli acceptance of refugees would have to be consistent with Israel's sovereign decision.

The plan passed the Israeli Cabinet on 28 December with 13 votes in favour, two votes against, and two abstentions – on condition that the Palestinians accepted the framework as well. The Palestinians, however, rejected the plan. Arafat demanded an explicit statement of the 'right of return', no international force in the Jordan Valley, and no compromise on the Temple Mount in direct contradiction to the framework.³⁰ At this point, Barak publicly called for an end to negotiations and the adoption of a unilateral disengagement plan.³¹

However, the Peace Cabinet – which greatly magnified the influence of doves such as Peres, Beilin, Foreign Minister Ben-Ami and Meretz leader Yossi Sarid – blocked Barak's initiative and instead convinced him to try one last round of talks. To gain his approval, some of them threatened to drop their support for Barak as their candidate for prime minister in the upcoming elections, and to denounce him for evading his duty to make peace.³²

Against this background – and with the elections imminent – an Israeli team went to conduct one final and frantic round of negotiations in Taba. There was intense opposition against continuing negotiations after the government had lost its mandate, and so close to the election. Many veteran doves were also opposed to this, including Professor Shlomo Avineri.³³ Hundreds of thousands of Israelis converged on Jerusalem on 8 January to protest against the latest proposals on Jerusalem in one of

the largest demonstrations in the city's history.³⁴ Nonetheless Beilin, EU envoy Morantinos, and others³⁵ claim that real progress was made and that with more time an agreement could have been reached. More persuasively, Barak, Israeli negotiator Gilad Sher, and Palestinian negotiator Mohamed Dahlan argued that little real progress was made.³⁶ Key positions presented at Taba by some Israelis reportedly went well beyond Prime Minister Barak's instructions.³⁷ Moreover, both leaders told their negotiators that they did not have a mandate to reach a formal agreement, and everyone understood that Barak was likely to lose the upcoming election. Indeed, the Israeli public made it abundantly clear that they had lost confidence in their negotiating partner when they elected Sharon prime minister in an unprecedented landslide victory in which he received 62.5 per cent of the vote.³⁸

Sharon's unprecedented electoral victory (and the only election held under the provisions of the law that changed the electoral system to allow for direct election of prime minister) was less a personal endorsement than a reflection of the intense and widespread opposition to Barak's policies. It was not so much that the public opposed the concessions proposed by Barak, at least at Camp David,³⁹ but having totally lost faith in Arafat⁴⁰ and the PA as partners for peace, the Israeli centre strongly objected to negotiations until a cease-fire was achieved and Arafat was no longer in power.⁴¹ Since the Camp David summit and the outbreak of violence in the PA, around 70 per cent of Israelis viewed Arafat as a terrorist rather than as a statesman, a 30 per cent increase over previous years.⁴² A similar proportion believed that even if Israel agreed to all his demands, Arafat would make additional demands aimed at foiling an agreement.⁴³ Consequently, while a plurality of Israelis retained their belief that ultimately the conflict could be resolved only by negotiations, in the short term the majority saw strengthening of Israel's military capacity to defeat the terror attacks as more important than peace talks, for only the second time since 1986.⁴⁴

As the leader of the opposition Sharon benefited from this situation, and the nature of the special election process and the short time-frame made it difficult for other potential candidates to enter the contest. (Netanyahu failed in his efforts to get support for dissolving the Knesset, thereby forcing a general election.) Sharon's record played an important role during the campaign. Sharon gained support as the hero who led the counter-attack in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, but this was offset by his role in the disastrous 1982 Lebanon campaign, including the findings of the Kahan Commission related to his failure to foresee and prevent the killing of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilla by Christian forces.

However the vast majority of Israelis wanted a different leadership in order to face the Palestinian campaign of violence. In response, Sharon established himself as the candidate of consensus rather than the far right,

pledging to establish a unity government and restore Israeli deterrence and security. As the terror attacks accelerated and Arafat showed no interest in compromises or in reaching an agreement with Israel, he essentially ensured the election of Sharon.

SHARON'S NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT: 2001–2

In contrast to the Barak government's decision against forming a NUG, Sharon made this a major priority, and negotiations began immediately after the elections. In the wake of the overwhelming election results, the Labour party and the left, including the 'Peace Camp', were devastated, with little power or support available to form a strong opposition. The continuing and escalating Palestinian terrorism, including the suicide bombing of the Dolphinarium nightclub in Tel Aviv that took over 20 young lives in June, led to deeper and wider rejection of the Oslo process and the Palestinian leadership under Arafat. Key academics from the left, such as Professor Benny Morris (a 'new historian' highly critical of Israel's past behaviour vis-à-vis the Palestinians), denounced the actions and policies of the Palestinian leadership,⁴⁵ while Amos Oz, often referred to as the 'spiritual leader' of the Peace Camp, also expressed anger in response to the Palestinian terror campaign.⁴⁶

Under these conditions, former general Binyamin (Fuad) Ben-Eliezer defeated Avraham Burg in Labour's leadership contest, and, along with Shimon Peres, took the party into the NUG under Sharon. Fuad was one of the earliest and most prominent leaders of the left to declare that Arafat's historical role had ended following the collapse of the peace process. Other Labour leaders rejected the decision to enter a NUG, and refused to take ministerial positions; a group led by Yossi Beilin left the party.

Within the framework of the NUG, Sharon, along with Ben-Eliezer as defence minister and Peres as foreign minister, was careful to respond to the terror attacks with restraint. Applying the lessons of his Lebanon debacle two decades earlier, Sharon followed two fundamental principles as prime minister: (1) he was careful to stay within the national consensus and avoid deep divisions and demonstrations; and (2) he sought to work closely with the US government and, with a few notable exceptions, avoid conflict with Washington.⁴⁷

The policies of restraint in response to terrorism and political contacts with the PA reflected both principles, but they also engendered growing hostility from Sharon's core supporters on the right. However, with nowhere else to go – and in the wake of the consistent consensus that supported Sharon's security policies – the right had little impact on policy. At the same time, Sharon generally maintained and even increased his standing in public opinion polls during this period.⁴⁸

Surprising many of his critics as well as some supporters, Sharon also maintained political contacts with Palestinian officials; even at the height of the terror campaign, he sent his son Omri, as well as other close associates, to meet with Arafat. Sharon also met with other PA officials, including Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and/or Abu Alla. Sharon demonstrated in this way that the door to political discussions had not been slammed shut, although a return to the Oslo process and the Camp David/Taba framework was out of the question. Instead, during this period Sharon began to speak of long-term interim frameworks in which Palestinian autonomy could be restored and extended gradually once the terror campaign was ended.⁴⁹

As noted, Prime Minister Sharon adopted a policy of relative restraint in response to escalating Palestinian terror attacks, in part in order to avoid domestic criticism and in part to prevent a rift with the US. While the Dolphinarium suicide bombing in June led to consideration of responses that included the expulsion of Arafat, Sharon did not choose this route, which could have led to the resignation of Defence Minister Ben-Eliezer and Foreign Minister Peres (and to the increase of Hamas' power). The military responses, while sharp, were also short-lived. During this period, IDF troops that entered Palestinian-controlled territory ('Area A'), withdrew quickly, particularly when the Bush administration expressed opposition.⁵⁰

As a result, while Sharon maintained significant overall domestic political support, he was subject to increasing criticism from his core constituency in the Likud. Indeed, in response to increasing terror attacks and what was perceived by some as an inadequate response from the IDF, Sharon's standing in the polls began to decline, particularly in the early months of 2002.⁵¹ Increasing numbers of the Israeli right wondered where 'the real Sharon had gone', and promoted the slogan 'Let the IDF win [the war on terror]'. In response to criticism from his former allies and supporters, Sharon remarked that when viewed from the position of prime minister, the world looks different.⁵²

However, the rate of terror attacks and Israeli casualties increased greatly, reaching a deadly climax on the first night of Passover, 29 March 2002. The final straw was the attack at the Park Hotel in Netanya in which many Israelis were killed, followed by a number of other bombings during Passover week. The policy of restraint suddenly ended. Under the framework of Operation Defensive Shield, large numbers of armoured IDF forces entered the core areas of Palestinian terror networks, in the cities of Jenin and Shechem (Nablus). Palestinian cities and refugee camps were isolated as IDF forces went into the densely crowded sections to capture and destroy terrorists and facilities for producing explosives. In Ramallah, Arafat's compound was surrounded, prisoners were captured and buildings were destroyed. In Bethlehem, after Palestinian gunmen took refuge in

the Church of the Nativity in an effort to force a massive Israeli response that would inflame the Christian world, the IDF laid siege to the area, eventually forcing the surrender and exile of the gunmen.

Sharon's domestic support rating shot up in the wake of Operations Defensive Shield and Determined Path. There was a very wide Israeli consensus in favour of these operations. Predictions of widespread protests and refusal to report for reserve duty (much of the fighting in this operation was conducted by reserve units) failed to materialize and, in fact, there were numerous reports of volunteers reporting for military units in numbers that were beyond the forces required.⁵³ In the weeks and months that followed this action, the level of terrorism and Israeli casualties declined significantly, with an increasing ratio of suicide bombers captured before they could strike.⁵⁴ Sharon received the credit for implementing this successful policy. The long and often difficult period of restraint that preceded the decision created wide support for the use of force when it became unavoidable, solidifying Sharon's position at the heart of the Israeli consensus.

Sharon's position at the heart of the consensus and his success in the fight against terror were crucial in blunting Labour attacks on him during the election campaign, particularly as these had been backed by the Labour party and its ministers (Ben-Eliezer and Peres in particular) during most of this period. This will be discussed in greater detail further on.

Relations with the US and Israeli Domestic Politics

The relationship between Jerusalem and Washington has often been a central issue in Israeli domestic politics. Positive links with Israel's only significant international ally (after the French defection during the 1960s), the world's leading democracy and the only remaining superpower after the Cold War, are important to the electorate. Close cooperation and frequent invitations to the White House for consultations helped boost the domestic political standing of the late Yitzhak Rabin and of Ehud Barak, while clear evidence of friction hurt the re-election campaigns of Yitzhak Shamir in 1992,⁵⁵ and of Netanyahu in 1999.⁵⁶

In this context, the support demonstrated by the US government and President George W. Bush for Sharon's policies for responding to terror was a central factor in his domestic political standing. The Bush administration recognized the pronounced restraint that Israel had shown during over a year of terror attacks. In April 2002, during Operation Defensive Shield, the US initially demanded an Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian cities in order to boost Secretary of State Powell's last-ditch effort to reach a ceasefire agreement with Arafat. Powell's visit went badly, and included a terror attack in Jerusalem and an angry clash with Arafat in Ramallah that ended with Powell's abrupt departure while Arafat was still surrounded by Israeli forces. This was to be the final official contact between the US government

and Arafat, whose credibility had reached rock-bottom. Subsequently, Washington backed away and acquiesced to the continued Israeli military presence in Palestinian cities. Thus, while Arafat had expected that the election of Sharon would lead to the isolation of Israel, the opposite in fact took place.

Shortly afterwards, on 24 June 2002, President Bush delivered a major policy speech outlining a new American political initiative. It included the standard staged US approach that called for an end to terrorism and the resumption of economic relations and other contacts between Israelis and Palestinians. However, the speech also included new elements. Bush demanded 'regime change' in the PA, declaring that Arafat had demonstrated that he was not a partner for peace, and must be replaced. (The capture of the *Karine A* ship, which was carrying arms and explosives from Iran to the Palestinians, and was linked directly to Arafat, was a factor in the change in the American position.) On this basis, Bush outlined a very ambitious programme to create a temporary Palestinian state by the end of 2003, with the aim of reaching a full agreement for 'two states, living side by side in peace' by 2005. This was to become the basis for the 'road map' to peace, which was revealed a few months later.

Although the time-frame and emphasis on Palestinian statehood was not exactly to the liking of Sharon, the public demand for Arafat's replacement and for the dismantling of terrorist networks fully reflected the Israeli position. Earlier American efforts to distinguish between 'global terrorism', as conducted by Bin Laden and al Qaeda, and Palestinian violence, which is often defended as legitimate efforts of 'freedom fighters', had disappeared. Indeed, the US accepted Sharon's argument that Arafat, as well as the leaders of various Palestinian terror factions, belonged in the same category as Bin Laden.

As a result, for the first time in five decades the policy of the US president was closer to that of the Israeli right than to the Israeli left. Whereas Sharon and Bush shared an uncompromising approach to combating terrorism in general and a parallel commitment to making Arafat 'irrelevant', Mitzna proposed restarting negotiations with Arafat while terrorism continued. Subsequently, the left lost one of its perennial electoral assets, tacit (and sometimes open) US support. The US did not play a direct role in the election campaign, but two decisions helped Sharon. First, the Bush administration granted Israel the loan guarantees that had been requested without demanding a settlement freeze in return, in stark contrast to the policy of Bush's father during the 1992 election. Second, Bush responded positively to Sharon's request to delay the official launch of the 'road map' until after the Israeli elections, a move which allowed Sharon to avoid domestic controversy. All this was in stark contrast to the behaviour of the other major powers involved in the peace process.⁵⁷

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, THE MIDDLE EAST
AND ISRAELI DOMESTIC POLITICS

Officially the 'road map' was the initiative not only of the US but also of the UN, the EU, and Russia – 'the Quartet'. In contrast to the US, the statements and policies of other members of the Quartet during the campaign continued to blame Israel for the sustained violence. The three also wanted to publish the road map prior to the Israeli election.⁵⁸ However, US policy ultimately carried the day with relative ease. In any case, compared to the United States, Israeli domestic political perceptions and emphasis on relations with Europe are of much less importance.

Since the beginning of the Palestinian terror campaign in September 2000, many Israelis have written Europe off as being largely pro-Palestinian, beholden to Arab influence (partly for economic reasons and partly in response to large Arab and Moslem populations in Europe), and in some cases affected by residual anti-Semitism. Set against this background, conflicts between Israeli and European leaders do not generally cause difficulties in terms of domestic politics.

The UK, which retained a working relationship with Israel (and acted in concert with the US), did play a role in the elections. First there was the blatant attempt to influence the outcome when Prime Minister Tony Blair invited and met personally with Mitzna in London, while refusing to meet Foreign Minister Netanyahu, who met instead with Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. (The fact that Mitzna was – like Blair – a Labour party leader, provided scant cover for this awkward effort at intervention.) Second, the UK organized a conference on Palestinian reform, but Sharon predictably refused to allow the Palestinians to attend, not wanting to give Arafat's representatives a platform and perhaps fearing that the occasion would turn into an anti-Israel conference. The media furor surrounding these incidents did not change Sharon's lead in the polls; if anything, the fracas served to strengthen his standing. Though the UK stance on Iraq was appreciated in Israel, its blatant linkage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict with the Iraq conflict and the state visit of Syrian President Assad, who publicly defended suicide terror attacks and made openly anti-Semitic statements, severely damaged the UK's credibility with the Israeli public.⁵⁹

Like the UK, the Egyptian government tried lamely and failed miserably to assist the Israeli left in the elections. In fact, Egyptian involvement in the peace process during the campaign worked to the advantage of Sharon. President Mubarak maintained an unofficial boycott of Sharon, which was matched by the invitation of a group of leading opposition figures to Cairo just before the election.⁶⁰ Nor had Israelis forgiven Cairo's decidedly unhelpful role during the period of negotiations between Barak and Arafat. On the other hand, throughout 2002 the Egyptians had been working to effect a cease-fire by mediating between different Palestinian factions.

This Egyptian behaviour signalled to the Israeli public that the onus for stopping the violence lay primarily on the Palestinian side, something that was very much in tune with Israeli government policy.

Finally, the US-led war against the Saddam regime in Iraq had little direct impact on the election campaign. There was a lot of discussion between Washington and Jerusalem regarding what Israel would do in the event of an attack, but given the prevailing assessment that the likelihood of an attack was low, this issue remained in the background. The only time the war came up as an issue in the campaign was when Mitzna accused Sharon of unnecessarily spreading fear of a potential Iraqi attack on Israel in order to divert attention from the corruption scandals. In parallel, members of the opposition criticized the government for telling Israelis to open their gas masks. They argued the massive cost of this act was unjustified, given the extremely low risk of an attack and the money could have been better spent elsewhere.⁶¹ Neither of these charges damaged Sharon's campaign.

THE 2003 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

In October 2002, Labour party leader Ben-Eliezer suddenly decided to break up the coalition, using funding for settlement activities in the debate on the budget as the reason or excuse (see the detailed discussion of the settlement issue below). The timing and the political environment of this decision contributed to speculation that Ben-Eliezer was concerned that continued participation in the NUG with Sharon during preparations for the scheduled election would make him vulnerable to a strong primary challenge within the Labour party (which happened anyway). The mixture of economic issues and the allocation of budget cuts on the one hand, and the broad public support for withdrawal from some isolated settlements on the other, seemed to present a good basis on which to stage such a departure from the unity framework. The break-up of the NUG and the absence of a stable political base for a narrow government in the framework of the Knesset elected in 1999 led to the decision to advance the elections to early 2003.

As a result of the strong counterattack against Palestinian terrorism and skilful handling of Israel's diplomatic situation, Sharon and the Likud went into the 2003 election campaign in a very strong position in terms of the central issues of security, war and peace. Unlike the 2001 special election, which was essentially a national vote of no confidence in Barak and his policies, in 2003 Sharon had established himself as a successful prime minister, having achieved more than might have been expected in responding to Palestinian terror, restoring security, nurturing cooperation with the US, and maintaining national unity under very difficult circumstances.

In contrast, in order to have a chance of winning this election, Labour and the Israeli left would have needed to overcome both the public's tendency to blame them for the Oslo 'catastrophe', and the public's perception that Sharon and the right are more credible in delivering security. In 2003, unlike 1992 and 1999, they failed to achieve this feat, and did not even come close. The public considered Barak's response to the Palestinian campaign of terrorism to have been too soft.⁶² During the NUG period, Labour failed to reap any benefits from the government's success in the war against terror, despite the fact that Ben-Eliezer was defence minister. Instead, Israel's military successes strengthened Sharon's position.

On paper, the Labour party team looked strong in terms of security. Among the top names on the Labour list were former IDF generals – Mitzna, Ben-Eliezer, Efraim Sneh, Matan Vilnai, and the former head of Mossad and Barak confidant, Danny Yatom. In addition, the party primaries pushed high-profile doves such as Yossi Beilin and Yael Dayan to very low positions on the party list, causing them to leave the party and join Meretz. However, the Labour campaign was unable to capitalize on these factors, focusing instead on the party's new leader – Amram Mitzna. As with Barak in 1999, Labour's election campaign emphasized Mitzna's military background, including the use of positive comments about Mitzna made by former Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.⁶³ While Mitzna's background could have served to give him a solid security image, his policy platform, especially his espousal of immediate negotiations with Arafat without a cease-fire, undermined this effort. This will be discussed further below.

THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF PERMANENT STATUS ISSUES: PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD, JERUSALEM, REFUGEE CLAIMS, BORDERS AND SETTLEMENTS

Because most of the permanent status issues identified in the 1993 Declaration of Principals were not subject to negotiation until 1999, these subjects were generally not central to domestic politics and debate during previous election campaigns. Israeli political leaders did not express views on refugee claims, and questions about a Palestinian state, borders and settlements were also largely avoided in this period. The exception focused on the status of Jerusalem. In 1996, Netanyahu's campaign slogan 'Peres will divide Jerusalem' contributed to his victory,⁶⁴ while Likud mayor of Jerusalem Ehud Olmert's reassurance that Barak would not divide Jerusalem had an impact in the 1999 election campaign.⁶⁵

However, in the 2001 elections, Barak's proposals and positions – from Camp David through Taba (where the policies adopted by the Israeli team were attributed to Barak, even though he was personally not enthusiastic about them) – provided a record which contributed to the outcome and

the election of Sharon. Similarly, in the 2003 election campaign, which took place in the shadow of the imminent publication of the new 'road map' to peace, questions regarding a Palestinian state, borders, settlements and refugee claims were discussed, particularly within both the internal Labour and Likud party contests. However, the details of the various positions on these issues played a far less central role than might be expected, mainly because all concerned believed that such negotiations were not imminent, and that immediate security considerations were of greater concern to the public.

Sharon and the Likud – 'Painful Concessions'

During his first term as prime minister, and in the framework of the NUG, Sharon had dropped some hints about possible political moves to break the stalemate. In responding to calls for the removal of isolated settlements which were considered by critics to be sources of friction that added extra strain to Israel's security needs, Sharon stated that settlement removal was not on the agenda during his first term in office. The implication of this position was that settlement removal in some form might be on the agenda in the second Sharon government, after elections for a new Knesset which would also strengthen the Likud. In response to increasing public demands, Sharon agreed to the construction of parts of a long security barrier to separate Israeli and Palestinian populations. While declaring this to be a security barrier only, the potential for later removal of settlements outside this barrier was considered in the Prime Minister's Office.⁶⁶

Sharon also issued some public statements regarding acceptance of the goal of establishing a Palestinian state following, of course, a cessation of violence, renewed negotiations and a change of leadership. Speaking in Latrun on 23 September 2001, Sharon declared: 'The State of Israel wants to give [the Palestinians] what no one offered them in the past, the possibility to establish a state'.⁶⁷ In the following weeks and months, when he was strongly criticized by members of the Likud Central Committee, Sharon defended this position vigorously.

In December 2002 (after Netanyahu had used this issue to boost his campaign for the leadership of the Likud⁶⁸), Sharon reiterated his position in a major policy speech given at the Herzliya Conference. With one eye directed at Washington and the other at the Israeli consensus, Sharon declared that the political concessions made under Oslo were 'irreversible'. He continued by noting that:

The current security reality, with the IDF operating freely inside Palestinian cities, arises from security needs and has not changed the political situation. . . Israel will not re-control territories from which it withdrew as a result of political agreements. . . The peace plan outlined in the President's speech is a reasonable, pragmatic, and practicable one, which offers real opportunity to achieve an agreement.

In his most explicit statement on this issue to date, Sharon declared that the second stage of the US-led 'road map' would include the establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders. He reiterated that he is willing to make 'painful concessions', but that his government 'will not be seduced into believing false promises which will endanger the security of the State of Israel'. Admitting 'doubts, reservations, and fears', he said: 'I have come to the conclusion that in the present regional and international reality, Israel must act with courage to accept the political plan which I have described. There are risks involved, but also enormous opportunities'.⁶⁹

LABOUR'S CAMPAIGN

The issue of settlements could potentially have been very problematic for Sharon. The majority (54 per cent) of the public viewed settlements as a strategic liability, and even a majority (58 per cent) of self-declared rightists were willing to dismantle most of them in the context of a permanent peace accord.⁷⁰ In contrast, Sharon – more than any other leading politician – has been very closely associated with the settlement project since the 1967 war. Indeed, it was Sharon who, after acquiescing to the 1998 Wye Accords, effectively initiated the illegal outposts by telling settlers, 'to grab hills' while they still could.⁷¹

Against this background, Labour tried to play up the issue. In October 2002, Labour under Ben-Eliezer withdrew from the NUG, ostensibly over the issue of preferential funding to the settlements at a time of economic hardship.⁷² Later, during the campaign, Mitzna went on well-publicized visits to isolated settlements to explain his plan for dismantling them. Settlements, however, were not the critical issue at hand for most of the electorate. Consequently, Sharon was able to finesse matters by stating a willingness to make 'painful compromises'.⁷³ Ironically, Sharon's centrist credentials regarding settlements were strengthened as a result of the decision taken by the then defence minister and Labour leader, 'Fuad' Ben-Eliezer, to forcibly evacuate the illegal hilltop settlement outpost Hedvat Maon just prior to the breakup of the NUG. One month later, 71 per cent of the public believed that Sharon would agree to evacuate isolated settlements.⁷⁴

Beyond the settlement issue, the 2003 Labour party's platform reflected the major shift in the party's positions following Barak's unprecedented proposals in the context of the final status negotiations in 2000. For the first time, the party was explicitly committed to dividing Jerusalem on the basis of a 'clear and defined border between Jewish and Arab Jerusalem with each municipality sovereign within its own area'. The platform also declared that the Temple Mount and Old City would be governed under a 'special arrangement'. Both of these shifts in position were foreshadowed in July 2002, when the party convention adopted Ben-Eliezer's diplomatic plan,

which embraced the Clinton framework and parts of the Saudi peace plan (adopted by the Arab league in Beirut in March 2001) as a basis for future negotiations. The party also totally rejected any 'right of return' for Palestinian refugees to Israel.⁷⁵ Confusion remained despite apparent widespread agreement within the party on these points. Danny Yatom, head of Labour's security team, stated that Camp David was the reference point for restarting talks, with the more generous Taba positions permanently off the table.⁷⁶ On the other hand, Mitzna vowed that he would renew unconditional negotiations with the Palestinians⁷⁷ from the point at which they broke off, i.e. Taba.⁷⁸

Meretz's platform provided far more extensive coverage of the peace process than the Labour platform. But for all that, the difference between the platforms on permanent status issues was minor. Interestingly, the Meretz platform provided a narrative regarding the collapse of the peace process. In addition to blaming the Palestinians for initiating terror, the platform criticized Barak's tactics as having eroded Palestinian trust in Israel's willingness to agree to a viable Palestinian state. The platform also emphasized that the Taba talks represented proof that a permanent status deal with the Palestinians was possible. This narrative, which shared the blame for the collapse of talks, seemed to reflect Mitzna's views as well, though not the views of others in the Labour leadership.⁷⁹ In Meretz, there were also those who were less impressed by Taba, as witnessed by the fact that Meretz conditioned its willingness for far-reaching compromise on a formal Palestinian declaration recognizing Israel as the state of the Jewish people and excluding the application of 'the right of return' to Israel.⁸⁰

As far as most of the public was concerned, the positions of Meretz and Labour were both viewed as far too dovish – well beyond the national consensus.⁸¹ The Clinton framework did not obtain the support of the majority of Israelis when it was presented to the parties in December 2000, and support for it fell in the wake of continued terror attacks. Moreover, in contrast to the Meretz narrative, the majority of Israelis believed that negotiations had failed due to Palestinian extremism and not due to 'mistakes on both sides'.⁸² Shinui was the main benefactor of this situation. In contrast to Meretz, the platform of the centrist Shinui had almost no reference to permanent status issues.⁸³ With no prospect of serious peace negotiations on the horizon, Shinui directed the attention of middle-class former Meretz and Labour voters to other issues of concern, especially the clash of cultural and economic interests with the *haredim*. Shinui nonetheless succeeded in generating a moderate security-orientated outlook that resonated with many ex-Labour and Meretz supporters.⁸⁴ Shinui's party platform stated simply that Israel should leave isolated settlements but not settlement blocs as part of a peace deal, and that there would be a *modus vivendi* for Jerusalem at the end of the peace process.

They also accepted a Palestinian state, but only after the Palestinians renounced 'the right to return'.⁸⁵

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES: ARAFAT, NEGOTIATIONS AND UNILATERAL DISENGAGEMENT

Following the collapse of the Oslo process, the left became divided as to how to proceed, and in the election campaign it tried to consolidate its position by synthesizing the various proposals. According to Mitzna's plan, Israel would withdraw immediately and unconditionally from Gaza and its settlements, and construct a separation fence between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank (there was already such a fence between Israel and Gaza). It would also support the establishment of an international mandate to take over responsibility for security in the Gaza Strip. A Mitzna government would then resume unconditional negotiations with Arafat, even before a cease-fire, in an attempt to forge a permanent status agreement. If no agreement could be reached inside a year, Israel would then commence a unilateral withdrawal from 65 per cent of the West Bank that would include dismantling many settlements.⁸⁶

Unilateral disengagement became a central theme for Labour in the election campaign, because the idea was believed to be Sharon's Achilles' heel. Polls indicated that 58 per cent of Israelis thought that Sharon was building the fence too slowly.⁸⁷ However, Labour failed to gain electoral advantage from this situation for two main reasons. First, they misunderstood the nature of the public's apparent support for unilateral disengagement. There was certainly overwhelming support (74 per cent–81 per cent) for building a fence: security separation. However, the public was more evenly divided regarding unilateral withdrawal from settlements.⁸⁸ Sharon took advantage of these distinctions. He openly opposed unilateral withdrawal,⁸⁹ but made a great effort to establish his credibility on security separation. In the course of the campaign, he made a well-publicized visit to the site where the fence was being built, while Likud Minister of Defence Shaul Mofaz announced on live television that the government would begin immediate construction of the second stage of the fence.⁹⁰

These actions helped to neutralize Labour's advantage on the issue, though Labour might still have been able to gain some mileage out of its support of unilateral disengagement had Mitzna's plan not advocated the immediate resumption of negotiations with Arafat. This stance created confusion since it advocated negotiation and unilateral disengagement simultaneously, and clearly pushed Mitzna out of the mainstream. Both Likud and Shinui benefited from it. Shinui supported the construction of the security fence and the immediate removal of illegal settlement outposts, but it opposed Mitzna's unilateral withdrawal plan.⁹¹ Such positions

aligned the party with the Israeli mainstream and thus enhanced its credibility on peace and security, even though centrists who voted for Shinui were primarily attracted by the party's domestic agenda. After the election, Meretz leader Yossi Sarid argued that the left's failure to speak out far more strongly against Arafat was one of the main causes of its large-scale defeat.⁹²

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Henry Kissinger: 'Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics'.

Moshe Dayan: 'Israel has no foreign policy, only a defense policy with international implications'.

Israeli foreign policy is driven by the interaction of two forces that are often in tension with one another: domestic politics and external pressures generated by a hostile strategic environment. As the electoral campaigns since the late 1980s have clearly demonstrated, external developments in terms of war and peace issues have also been a major factor in setting the agenda and influencing the dynamics of Israeli domestic politics. Most notably, terrorism has been a factor in determining the result of several previous elections, such as in 1988 and 1996. On the other hand, the role of domestic politics grew in importance after 1967. As the Arab world began to demonstrate increasing signs of readiness to come to terms with Israel, Israel appeared to have more policy options, which afforded domestic politics a greater role.

The Six-Day War opened up a great ideological debate over the future of the territories captured in that war. This debate became increasingly central to domestic politics, leading to a situation in which the issues related to the peace process gradually became of importance in most elections. The implications of every ethnic, religious or social divide in Israel were subsequently analyzed in terms of its impact on which vision would govern Israel. The assumption behind this sub-group analysis was that such divisions would have major ramifications on the peace process via domestic politics.

The 2001 and 2003 elections represent a major watershed regarding the balance between the two forces described above which transformed Israeli politics and society. The visibility and role of domestic divisions fell drastically, while the role of external factors rose dramatically. On the one hand, the implementation of the 1995 Interim Agreement and the subsequent Israeli withdrawals from large parts of Gaza and the West Bank effectively signalled the death of the classic right-wing Zionist ideology which opposed partition of the historic Land of Israel. On the

other hand, the Palestinian campaign of terrorism and rejectionist diplomacy in 2000 undermined the credibility of the classic left-wing dream of a genuine peace – a ‘New Middle East’. The violence and hatred negated the claim that the key to peace was through Israeli concessions and a willingness to accept a Palestinian state. It was this fact, more than any other, which lay behind the collapse in support for the Israeli left in the 2003 elections.

While different approaches to the peace process continue to be espoused in Israel, public opinion has been characterized by consensus more than at any time since 1967. In its most basic form, this consensus is founded on a pragmatic Zionist approach to the peace process. Against this background, the extent and nature of future Israeli concessions will now tend to depend more than anything else on the Arab and Palestinian response to this new situation. If the new leadership in the PA and the wider Arab world is willing to combat the terrorists within their midst, reform their authoritarian political systems, and genuinely accept the long-term presence of a secure Israel, then the chances of Israeli magnanimity are better than ever. If these efforts fail, the public is likely to demand unilateral disengagement based only on Israeli interests. It remains to be seen whether the Likud under Sharon would implement this course in the face of internal opposition, or whether such a scenario might paradoxically create stability and present an opportunity for a re-emphasis on social issues that will benefit Labour.

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