

"Sharon's Illusion"

When Ariel Sharon suffered his stroke, most Western commentators mused that the world would never know his exact plans for bringing peace to Israel/Palestine, and that no one else might be able to resolve the issue as he was about to do. This seems to me quite absurd. I know his plans, as he scarcely hid them. And these plans would not have resolved the issue, since they were based on a fundamental illusion.

National security is the obsession of most Jewish Israelis. As well it might be, since the basic security of the state of Israel is quite precarious and has been for a long time. Ariel Sharon was all his life someone who wished to obtain full sovereignty for Israel over the entire territory of what had been the British Mandate, and in some areas (Golan) beyond it. He wanted this territory to constitute a Jewish state, with a clear Jewish majority of the population.

In these views, he was in the direct line of Vladimir Jabotinsky and his Revisionist movement within Zionism. Jabotinsky, let us remember, had formed his party in protest against the British exclusion of Trans-Jordan (today's Jordan) from the Mandate. The Revisionists (of which today's Likud party is the descendant) always had the most expansionist vision of the territory of Israel. The Revisionists were also always insistent on the necessity for a militarily strong (and when they thought necessary aggressive) Israel, the policy of an "iron wall."

Sharon was also a brilliant soldier. He played an increasingly important role in successive Arab-Israeli wars, and a notoriously repellent role in the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, for which the Israelis themselves eventually formally sanctioned him. As a minister in various governments, he was a leader in pushing new settlements in the occupied territories after 1973, with the intent of creating *faits accomplis* that would be very difficult to undo in any future peace negotiations.

So what gave him his current reputation as a peacemaker? Two things: One is Sharon's dose of realism. He came to realize that the full implementation of his program aroused too much opposition even in the U.S. government to be feasible. And he came to fear the impending demographic "catastrophe" - an Arab majority in Israel as a result of differential birth rates. And on the other side (that of centrist Israelis and pro-Israeli Westerners) the increasingly widely-held belief that only a notorious hawk would be politically able to make the necessary concessions to obtain a settlement. The examples of DeGaulle and Algerian independence, and Nixon's meeting Mao Zedong were regularly cited.

What was Sharon's plan? He planned to evacuate those parts of the occupied territories that were densely populated by Arabs and thinly populated by Jews. Gaza was the first step, and various scattered zones of the West Bank would have been next. He planned simultaneously to incorporate zones that today have high Jewish settlement. This included East Jerusalem of course, but also three settlement blocs in the West Bank around which the wall is presently being built. He then planned to say to the Palestinians that you may set up a state in the remaining areas, provided that you have no serious military apparatus and provided that you recognize Israel and the permanence of these new boundaries. And since he knew that no Palestinian leaders would accept such terms, he intended to do this unilaterally, without consulting them.

What was the illusion? He believed first of all that the Palestinians would have no choice but to live with this unilaterally-imposed reality. How he could think that is beyond me, since the most "moderate" of Palestinian leaders have already made it quite clear that this would be absolutely unacceptable. And of course the Palestinians are already about to vote in less "moderate" leaders. He believed second of all that time was on Israel's side. How he could think that is also beyond me. The Israelis have been losing international legitimacy steadily since 1973 at least. Arrogant unilateralism isn't working for George W. Bush. There's no hope it would work for Israel. Indeed, Sharon's plan would speed up the delegitimization of Israel, just as Bush's invasion of Iraq has speeded up the decline of American power.

Abba Eban, Israel's famed diplomat, is supposed to have said, "the Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Could this not be said even more forcefully of Israeli leadership over the past 50 years? Sharon may have been the last gasp of illusionary politics for Israel. Peace is always a political, not a military, arrangement.

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