The Sharon Doctrine

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The Mixed Legacy of an Israeli Unilateralist

For most Arabs, no Israeli in history is more synonymous with violence and Israeli expansionism than Ariel Sharon. His name quickly conjures the worst massacres, deepest pro-settlement fanaticism, and most extreme nationalistic provocations in the Palestinian bill of particulars against Israel. Less readily appreciated by most Arabs is the complexity of Sharon's legacy and the important lessons, both positive and negative, his final policies suggest for peace.

For most of his life, Sharon was the epitome of what has been called "gun Zionism": the notion that Jewish Israelis have a kill-or-be-killed relationship with the Arabs, and above all the Palestinians, surrounding them. He spent most of his professional life armed, first as a teenager in the Jewish underground under the British mandate in 1942, and then as a Haganah fighter in the so-called "Battle for Jerusalem" in the fall of 1948. Sharon quickly earned a reputation as a maverick best suited for missions that required ruthlessness -- before long, he was placed in charge of Israel's early "special operations" Unit 101.

This group eventually specialized in tit-for-tat raids with Palestinian guerrilla groups, which often resulted in civilian deaths on both sides. The most notorious of these was the Qibya massacre in 1953 when troops under Sharon's command attacked a West Bank village and killed 69 Palestinians, two thirds of whom were women and children. Sharon later wrote that he had believed that the civilians had already fled the village when their homes were destroyed, although contemporaneous documents cast doubt on that account. Sharon told his troops the purpose of the attack was "maximal killing and damage to property," and reports from both the Israeli military and UN observers are consistent with a deliberate effort to kill civilians as opposed to Sharon's version.

In Israel's conventional wars with Arab armies, Sharon was generally regarded as an effective, but unpredictable and undisciplined, commander. But the Israeli public was quick to lionize his performance in the 1973 war, during which he was credited with creative maneuvers that defeated Egypt's Second and Third Armies on the crucial southern front. National fame led to a political

career, and in 1981, Sharon became Israeli Minister of Defense.

That made Sharon Israel's de facto commander-in-chief during the country's invasion of Lebanon. In September 1982, Sharon's forces facilitated and, in effect, permitted a large massacre of Palestinian civilians by Lebanese Christian militias at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps under Israeli control. Although Lebanese carried out the actual killings, the Israeli government in general, and Sharon in particular, are almost universally considered by to be responsible. As Israel's defense minister at the time, the troops controlling the camps were under his direct command. Israel's own Kahan Commission of official inquiry into the massacre held the Israeli military "indirectly responsible" for the massacre and found that Sharon "bears personal responsibility" for not anticipating the entirely predictable killing or taking any measures to stop it. The Commission recommended his removal from office.

The bodies piled up in Sabra and Shatila irrevocably defined Sharon's reputation for Arabs and many others. For almost two decades, his political career languished on the margins. But, as memories faded, he clawed his way back into favor, cultivating a growing constituency on the ultra-nationalist right during the first premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu. Succeeding Netanyahu as head of the Likud party, Sharon proved that he had maintained his talent for provocation. In September 2000, Sharon, accompanied by large numbers of police officers and some Israeli extremists, marched through the Haram Al-Sharif complex, also known as the Temple Mount, and declared that the holy Muslim sites there would remain under permanent Israeli control.

In most Palestinian and Arab narratives, this is considered the beginning of the second intifada. Standard Israeli narratives, by contrast, hold that Palestinian President Yasser Arafat launched it through deliberate Palestinian violence after the failure of the Camp David summit in the previous summer. Both versions are contradicted by the definitive Mitchell Commission Report, which cites instead Israeli border police use of live fire against Palestinians at same holy site a few days after Sharon's visit. But if Sharon was trying to provoke an incident, as the Mitchell Report strongly implies, he certainly succeeded.

The subsequent explosion of the Second Intifada propelled Sharon, at long last, into the premiership, in February 2001. His attitude towards the conflict was tough by Israeli standards (and even by Sharon's own standards) and ensured that many more Palestinian civilians perished than Israelis. Yet as he was confronting, perhaps for the first time in his career, a conflict that clearly had no military solution, he endorsed, with some reservations, the U.S.-led Roadmap for Peace in 2003. And, in 2004, Sharon explicitly acknowledged the need for a Palestinian state. He even started referring forthrightly to the Israeli "occupation" of Palestinian lands, something most Israeli right-wingers rarely admit.

Sharon was shifting. But why? In general, Israeli leaders who have gone from being pro-occupation to supportive of Palestinian statehood have been impelled by the same factor: demographics. Sharon was no more able to answer what Israel was to do with 4.5 million occupied Palestinians -- men and women whom it could neither incorporate nor peacefully dominate -- than his predecessors. The only viable conflict-ending solution was a Palestinian state.

Sharon was not the Israeli leader who would make a final peace agreement with the Palestinians. But he did take a major step, the implications of which Palestinians and Israelis alike cannot underestimate: he evacuated settlements in both Gaza and the northern West Bank. Sharon did not do this in the interests of peace. He did it as an Israeli national imperative, and a way to resolve a strategic liability. Sharon's action is sometimes erroneously described as a "withdrawal" from Gaza, but Sharon more accurately termed it a "unilateral redeployment." In other words, Sharon's shift was not one towards an agreement with the Palestinians, but rather towards increased Israeli unilateralism. His action was entirely pursuant to Israeli interests and conducted without any agreement on the Palestinian side.

In his unexpected action, Sharon faced and overcame substantial resistance from the settlement movement in Israel. By explaining why the evacuation was a strategic and military necessity, he ultimately mobilized the support of a large Israeli majority. Indeed, the experience led him to leave the Likud and form a new center-right party, Kadima, shortly before the stroke that incapacitated him. Several Israeli journalists have suggested that Sharon was anticipating repeating a larger withdrawal in the West Bank should he become Kadima's first prime minister.

There are two crucial lessons to be drawn from Sharon's last major action and final legacy, one positive, the other negative. On the positive side, Sharon demonstrated that settlements can, in fact, be evacuated. Because of his actions, it is no longer even possible to ask whether the Israeli government is capable of dismantling settlements. The questions are simply when and where they will choose to do so. And that means that none of the existing settlements and other demographic, infrastructural, topographic, or administrative changes Israel enforces in the occupied territories should be regarded as irreversible. The implications of this for the prospects of a two-state solution are profound.

On the negative side, Sharon yet again demonstrated that unilateralism between Israel and the Palestinians is a dead-end that only produces more conflict. Unilateral acts do not leave a party on the other side that has entered into a mutual agreement for its own reasons and therefore has a stake in making things work. It would have been wiser for Palestinians to have responded to the Gaza redeployment differently -- in the event, they allowed Gaza to fall into the hands of Hamas rather than reflecting a well-functioning and properly-governed society. But Israel did not give them any clear incentive to see the action as an opportunity for progress. Exactly the same can be said of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, which was as unilateral as its various invasions of that country had been.

Israelis should consider this when they complain that their "withdrawals" from Lebanon and Gaza were "rewarded" with rocketfire from Hezbollah and Hamas. To conclude that Arabs are recalcitrant or that agreements with them are impossible is to badly misread the reality of such policies. What unilateralism produces is a change in the context of conflict, not an end to it. The same would almost certainly apply to any Israeli unilateral action, as reportedly contemplated by Sharon, in the West Bank.

One need only contrast the track record of unilateralism with that of mutual agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The peace treaty with Jordan is rock solid, and that with Egypt has survived the transitions from Anwar Sadat to Hosni Mubarak to military rule to Mohamed Morsi and

now the new, interim Egyptian government, entirely unscathed. Even the armistice with Syria has been largely satisfactory from the Israeli point of view.

The real legacy of Israel's most famous and notorious practitioner of "gun Zionism" was to simultaneously demonstrate that the government of the State of Israel is, despite all its doubts, capable of overriding the settler movement in the greater national interest, but also that if it does so unilaterally, it will be a dead-end. Whether Sharon himself would have come to see this by now, or would have clung to a vision of unilateralism -- as so many on the Israeli right are increasingly coming to embrace -- we cannot know. But, even if he never got the chance to draw the right conclusions from the unsatisfactory consequences of his final policies, the rest of us can, and must, act on their implications.For Palestinians, Ariel Sharon's name conjures Israel's worst massacres, deepest pro-settlement fanaticism, and most extreme nationalistic provocations. Less readily appreciated are the important lessons, both positive and negative, his final policies suggest for peace.

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