7. Politics and Diplomacy

AS ISRAELI FORCES were clearing recalcitrant settlers from their Gaza homes on August 16, 2005, Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in Ramallah, published a column in the *Jerusalem Post* headlined, "How Sharon and Abbas Can Both Win."[1] Shikaki, a pollster and political analyst respected in Israel and the west, questioned the wisdom of Israeli unilateralism in Gaza and on the West Bank as opposed to Lebanon, where no one on the other side wanted to talk. Here, he argued, Hamas may be as close-minded as Hezbollah, preferring to paint Israel's withdrawal as a victory for Palestinian resistance, but Abu Mazen, supported by Palestinian public opinion, wanted to reduce tensions and negotiate. Make him look good by easing restrictions on Palestinian trade and movement, and he will help Sharon and Israel by defeating Hamas and talking about the terms for settling the conflict. In other words, let the PA rather than Hamas control the Palestinian narrative of withdrawal.

Shakaki updated his survey data two months later for a conference at Brandeis University hosted by Shai Feldman, director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies and former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv. By that October conference, 84 percent of Palestinians were convinced that violence had played a role in the Israeli withdrawal. Irre-

1. Khalil Shikaki, "How Sharon and Abbas Can Both Win," *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2005.

spective of this faith in the efficacy of violence, however, the percentage of Palestinians willing to compromise on final status issues had grown from 25 percent in 1996 to 35–40 percent after Camp David to 55–60 percent after the Gaza pullout. Meanwhile, the needle of popular support for Hamas seemed stuck in the mid-high 20s, though it was later shown rising. Shikaki interpreted the Palestinian message to Hamas pointedly: "Thank you very much. Now go home."[2]

Looking back after the January 2006 elections, Shikaki's words have a quaint "Dewey beats Truman" ring. His message, however, was not fundamentally different from the sort of practical, humanistic "day after" advice the Sharon government was receiving from many sources including the PA, left-of-center Israelis, the Europeans, and Condoleezza Rice. Abu Mazen and his PA were the last best hope for solving the problem. Yet Abu Mazen lacked a strong political base. His one hope, then, was to demonstrate effectiveness through making people's lives better. That meant convincing the Israelis to move quickly on an assortment of issues that made a difference.

In reality, Israel's cooperation proved grudging, piecemeal, and incomplete, reflecting the judgment of its political leadership that Abbas was a losing horse. Sharon's political position inside Israel grew strong enough for him to move with apparent success toward a major overhaul of the country's political structure.[3] Abu Mazen, on the other hand, suffered one personal setback after another, to the point where younger leaders of his own Fatah Party offered their own slate of legislative candidates, discarding Abbas' prime minister, Ahmed Qurei.[4] Atop their new slate was

2. Speech presented by Khalil Shikaki on October 20, 2005, at Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, "Israel and the Palestinians: The Road Ahead."

3. See, for example, Steven Erlanger and Greg Myre, "Sharon's New Party Shuffles the Political Deck, Setting Off a Scramble for Israeli Elections," *New York Times*, November 22, 2005.

4. See, for example, Conal Urquhart, "Fatah Faces Split as Militant Leader

Marwan Barghouti, presently serving five consecutive life sentences in an Israeli jail for planning terrorist operations executed by his Tanzim militia during the Second Intifada that killed a total of five people. But even Barghouti was not enough to stop what turned out to be a massive and stunning Hamas victory. Why events unfolded as they did helps clarify the situation in both the Israeli and Palestinian camps and define what one can look for in the period ahead.

First, it is worth repeating that unilateral separation came about not because a cooperative Palestinian faction was waiting in the wings but, to the contrary, because Israelis in large numbers had concluded there was no Palestinian partner with whom to negotiate. When Sharon first announced his plan for unilateral territorial moves, Yasser Arafat was running Fatah, the PLO, and the PA. He had been thoroughly discredited in the eyes of most Israelis as a recidivist terrorist whose pretensions to the contrary during the Oslo years had proven a pack of lies. Abu Mazen had been plucked from early if comfortable retirement, whisked off, and made prime minister. He quit after a few months, principally because Arafat wanted no division of power. True, after Arafat's death Abu Mazen had been elected in a fair vote. Yet although the position had been conferred on him, real power had not. Thus, while several matters—ranging from what to do with the settlers' homes to how Palestinians could travel between Gaza and the West Bank—demanded consultation with the Israelis and some give and take, they were not negotiations in any sense of the word; they involved no quid pro quo. Israel's responsibility for unilaterally ensuring its own interests was magnified, though some coordination with the PA at places such as the Rafah crossing remined essential.

Second, as the principal critique of the unilateral pullback

Quits to Set Up Rival Movement: Palestinian Young Guard Out to Modernise Party: President Tries to Appease Rebels without Success," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2005.

plan was that it would reward—and hence encourage—terrorism, Sharon tried to ensure that the pullback itself generated no new security problems. Take the issue of the Rafah crossing along the Philadelphi Corridor separating Egypt from Gaza. Even under Israeli control, the crossing became a flashpoint for the smuggling of weapons into Gaza through tunnels dug from the Egyptian side. Terrorists sought by the Israelis also on occasion found their way through the tunnels. With the Israelis now pulling back, who would police the border? If not the Israelis, could they at least monitor the checkpoint in real time? Using what equipment? Who would make the decision as to whether a particular individual was free to cross? In the end, with the prodding of U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and the motivation provided by a couple of all-night bargaining sessions, the parties came close enough to agreement to permit Rafah to reopen on November 25. The result: the border is presently under PA control and its officers have the final say over who can cross; the Israelis monitor the proceedings via live surveillance cameras; Egypt and teams of European observers patrol Egypt's side of the border. Here, as we shall see shortly, from the vantage of security, the deal worked poorly. The price of guns in the area—a good indicator of smuggling trade success—fell to the lowest point in years. And in a truly ugly incident, two Egyptian troops were shot and killed as a Palestinian mob, angered by the slow clearance pace, surged across the border into Egypt while another commandeered a front-end loader and began smashing down a restraining wall. Israelis, now safely out of Gaza, barely blinked. They had suspected all along that Abu Mazen was not a man who people feared to cross.

The Karni crossing is a third illustration of the clash between Israeli security and Palestinian mobility. Karni had long been the exit point for fruits and vegetables produced by Palestinian farmers. With the coming of the Second Intifada, Karni became a target of Palestinian terrorist attacks. The Israelis, therefore, became

even more security conscious both at the Karni crossing and at the points of final destination, a concern that was underlined when militants attempted unsuccessfully to blow up the crossing. Palestinians soon faced economic loss if not disaster. They complained of multiple cargo transfers and inspection delays resulting in spoiled merchandise. And that was just to get to the far side of the checkpoint! Once on the West Bank, the trucks were subjected to the same delays as resident Palestinian vehicles. The Israelis recommended that the produce be transported in shipping containers, making goods far easier to monitor. But they were in short supply. So trucks continued to ply the roads, accompanied by multiple inspections, the cargo transfers, and delays. More often than not, Palestinian farmers would have been better off destroying whatever portion of the produce could not be sold or consumed locally, yet another example of the terrorism surtax that survived even after Intifada 2 withered away.

A final area of Rice-induced accommodation involved Israel's agreement to permit bus convoys carrying Palestinians to travel between Gaza and Tarqumiya on the West Bank beginning December 15, 2005. At Israeli insistence, no one between sixteen and thirty-five may be a passenger, the travelers must be Gaza residents, and all must return to Gaza within ten days. Yet despite such security measures, by year's end the service had still to begin. According to a military spokesman, given the "situation in Gaza when rockets are still flying from Gaza to Israel, and all these security problems it is the decision of the minister of defense that until the situation is quiet, we won't go ahead with the convoys."[5] One can only imagine the nature of Israeli cooperation on these sensitive border issues with Hamas now in power.

Sharon might have had more incentive to help Abbas had the Palestinian chairman shown any inclination to tackle Hamas, PIJ,

5. Steven Erlanger, "No Buses Roll from Gaza to West Bank, Despite Deal," *New York Times*, December 31, 2005.

or even Fatah's own rebellious militias. But the most he could extract from them was a "period of calm," and even that was punctuated by suicide bombs, targeted raids, and Qassan rockets fired from abandoned settlements in Gaza toward Sderot, Ashkelon, and other sites inside the Green Line. Subsequently, Israel declared in late December the northern strip of Gaza a "no go" zone—similar to the "free fire" zones of the Vietnam era—subject to perpetual reconnaissance and attack in an effort to push the Palestinian rockets out of range. By then, the list of "day after" lifestyle improvements that could help Abbas and Fatah overcome the Hamas challenge was far from Israeli minds.

The Israeli leader was also engaged in a fierce struggle within his own party. Likud was deeply conflicted. This was the successor to Herut, the party of Vladimir Jabotinsky, a secular advocate of Greater Israel. Jabotinsky believed conquest of the nation from its resident Arab population would free the Jewish spirit and toughen the Jewish character, just as defeating the Native American tribes who stood in the path of America's westward expansion had provided that nation of immigrants with one of its unifying myths. It was also the party of Menachem Begin, the man who had made settling Judea and Samaria a national policy. Of course, Jabotinsky died in 1940, an also-ran in the struggle for primacy against David Ben Gurion, and Begin had been overcome with depression as Israel's push into Lebanon turned increasingly sour.

More to the contemporary debate, as prime minister, Bibi Netanyahu had pulled back from most of the Hebron area and signed the Wye Accord restoring Palestinian self-rule to 97 percent of its population. Netanyahu also endorsed, albeit with reservations, the Sharon pullback. His last-minute objections to the plan, which led to his resignation from Sharon's cabinet just before its final vote on the pullout, made him appear more Machiavelli than Jabotinsky or Begin. But if the split between Sharon

and the hard-line Likudniks had become hard to define in purely philosophical terms, the combination of history and political emotion made it painful nonetheless.

Sharon had little time to fret about the hard times Palestinians faced in Gaza. He needed reasonable quiet to contemplate his political moves. Should he stay with the Likud through the nominating convention in December or bolt early? With only 52 percent of the vote, he had narrowly defeated an effort by Likud opponents to move up the party primary. The tightness of that contest reflected the deep fractures within his party. But the win also conveyed the sense of many party members that Likud could only win with Sharon atop the ticket. Now he was running neck and neck with Netanyahu among Likud voters even as he outdistanced Bibi in polls positioning him as an independent party candidate. Was it time to complete the long political march begun with the 2003 speech at Herzyliya? Unless he moved swiftly, he might have to move as a loser in the Likud primary.

Sharon also wanted to parlay his withdrawal from Gaza into concrete diplomatic gains. Israel has always defined these as garnering increased support from the United States while reducing its isolation elsewhere. In these respects, Sharon was something of a diplomatic bus driver, rolling his vehicle some distance down the road, collecting fares, rolling to the next stop, collecting additional fares, and so forth. By the time the final cabinet vote loomed, he had already collected his fare from the United States, getting Washington to renounce the Palestinian refugee right of return to Israel and to reject any obligation for Israel to return to the precise 1967 borders. Then in July 2005, the broader diplomatic offensive began with a visit to France and some high-visibility, low-content meetings with President Jacques Chirac. Weeks earlier the trip seemed in jeopardy when Sharon invited French Jews to emigrate in order to skirt rampant anti-Semitism in France, but the insult was paved over when Sharon withdrew the

reference and Chirac denounced both anti-Semitism and terrorism.

More significant was the late August meeting in Ankara between Israeli foreign minister Sylvan Shalom and his Pakistani counterpart, Khurghid Kasuri, a meeting that the latter explicitly linked to the Gaza pullout. The meeting was organized by Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyep Erdogen with Pakistan also seeking and obtaining endorsements of the initiative from Abu Mazen and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Pakistan made it clear that it had no plans to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel until a Palestinian state is established with its capital in Jerusalem. Regardless, Mr. Shalom still said the get-together had "tremendous significance, not just in our relationship with Pakistan, but the entire Muslim world."[6]

Sharon addressed the UN General Assembly on September 15.[7] The speech was filled with personal testimony of Sharon's relationship with the land and his deep love of "sowing and harvesting, the pastures, the flock and the cattle." Reaching an emotional eloquence and depth rarely found in his domestic talks—including those dealing with the Gaza withdrawal—he captured the difficulty of giving up even part the land: "Every inch of land, every hill and valley, every stream and rock, is saturated with Jewish history, replete with memories." Still, he fully acknowledged, Palestinians also live there and "Palestinians will always be our neighbors. We respect them and have no aspirations to rule over them. They are also entitled to freedom and to a national, sovereign existence in a state of their own." That was the first time an Israeli prime minister embraced Palestinian statehood before an international body. There was no letting the

6. Silvan Shalom, "Pakistan-Israel in Landmark Talks," BBC News, Thursday, September 1, 2005, 14:49 GMT, 15:49 UK.

7. Ariel Sharon, prime minister (Israel), Speech to United Nations, "Now the Palestinians Must Prove Their Desire for Peace," September 15, 2005.

Palestinians off the hook on their single most important commitment, however; "The most important test the Palestinian leadership will face is in fulfilling their commitment to put an end to terrorism and its infrastructures, eliminate the anarchic regime of armed gangs and cease the incitement and indoctrination of hatred towards Israel and the Jews."[8]

On October 11, 2005, the *New York Times* reported on the vastly improved atmosphere at the UN with respect to Israel. For example, the article observed that "Israel recently proposed a United Nations resolution, it submitted its candidacy for a two-year seat on the Security Council, and its prime minister has been warmly received speaking to the General Assembly."[9] The report credited Secretary General Kofi Annan for reducing Israel's marginalization, through such measures as a seminar on anti-Semitism, a resolution condemning the same, a special ceremony commemorating the liberation of the Nazi death camps, and Secretary Annan's own decision to address a ceremony at the opening of a new wing at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem. These developments may not be directly linked to the Gaza pullout, but it would be hard to imagine any of them occurring before Sharon's Herzyliya speech and the resulting steps toward withdrawal.

Previously on September 30, the *New York Times* correspondent in Kuwait filed a report indicating that Kuwaitis were actively debating their long-standing efforts to isolate Israel and considering revisions in the policy.[10] The editor in chief of the English-language paper *The Arab Times* was quoted in the article as saying, "We Arabs have also reached a unanimous agreement to make peace with Israel as our strategic choice, before con-

8. Ibid.

9. Warren Hoge, "U.N. Is Gradually Becoming More Hospitable to Israel," *New York Times*, October 11, 2005.

10. Hassan M. Fattah, "Kuwaitis Quietly Breach a Taboo: Easing Hostility Toward Israel," *New York Times*, October 5, 2005.

ducting negotiations with that country."[11] Referring specifically to the Gaza withdrawal, a Saudi journalist residing in Kuwait wrote, "Normalizing ties with Israel is an important event, and its positive effect will permeate every aspect of the Arab political, economic, cultural and social life."[12]

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was not an early advocate of Israel's unilateral disengagement plan. To the contrary, as he argued in an April 2004 visit with President Bush at the latter's Texas ranch, by letting Israel do what it was comfortable doing without any Palestinian input, the move virtually preempted the possibility of real progress with the Road Map or in any other forum.[13] The fix was already in, however. While Mubarak dallied in Texas, the president returned to Washington for a meeting with Sharon at which he endorsed the plan; he further rewarded Sharon by bestowing a general blessing on Israeli West Bank settlement blocs.

Recognizing the futility of his initial plea, Mubarak thereupon launched an initiative designed to address his strategic concerns regarding the move, specifically his belief that it would turn Gaza into a bitter, impoverished and isolated "Hamastan" whose radicals would infiltrate Egypt, causing untold mischief. This would constitute an unstable situation that could ultimately threaten his regime. The October 2004 terrorist attacks in Taba and Nuweiba served to underline for Mubarak the generally small number and low quality of his forces in the area. He responded by returning Ambassador Mohamad Bassiouni to Tel Aviv with an offer to help train, arm, and equip any PA security forces needed to keep other militias in check. Mr. Bassiouni, who had been home for "consultations" since the Second Intifada broke out in 2000, also

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ayellet Yehiav, "The Egyptians at Philadelphi: Regional Interests, Local Challenges," *Strategic Assessment* 8, no. 3 (November 2005).

helped organize the official December 2004 signing of a Qualified Industrial Zones agreement whereby certain goods produced by Egypt using components made in Israel are permitted into the United States duty free. Mr. Mubarak further offered support for the PA by sending an ambassador to Ramallah, the West Bank administrative capital.[14]

In March 2005, Mubarak hosted the Cairo Conference involving Fatah, Hamas, and eleven splinter factions focused on determining what to do in the face of Israel's planned Gaza withdrawal. The gathering decided to institute a period of calm.[15] Despite some firing on Israeli targets by Hamas early in the summer of 2005, the part of the deal relating to Israel worked rather well. It would be Palestinian versus Palestinian violence that would get out of hand.

Mubarak subsequently concluded this round of participation by agreeing to install a force of 750 troops to help police the entire Philadelphi Corridor, replacing the departing Israelis.[16] From one who had gone to Washington hoping to block the unilateral disengagement, Mubarak had led Egypt into a position of substantial utility, a clear triumph for Sharon's diplomacy.

There was, however, a downside to the Cairo Conference. To achieve the consent of Hamas to the *tahdiya* (period of calm), Abu Mazen had agreed to legislative council elections with favorable ground rules, allowed Hamas to field candidates without disbanding its militia, renouncing terrorism, or agreeing to abide by the Oslo Accords. He also issued a powerful statement committing his government never to compromise on the absolute

14. Ibid.

15. See, for example, Molly Moore, "Militants Extend Pledge Not to Attack Israel," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2005.

16. See, for example, Margot Dudkevitch and Orly Halpern, "Egypt Deploys at Philadelphi," *Jerusalem Post*, September 11, 2005; and Thanassis Cambanis and Anne Barnard, "After Gaza Pullout, Egypt Border Is New Division," *Boston Globe*, September 18, 2005.

right of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel. Thus Mubarak's bias toward a negotiated end to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute started a chain of events, leading to formal commitment by Abu Mazen, making that result impossible to reach. Plus, in yielding on the question of private militias, Abu Mazen had so diminished Israel's stake in the outcome of Palestinian elections as to negate the likelihood of serious cooperation on the quality-of-life issues.

On September 21, 2005, Jordan's king Abdullah II hosted a gathering of approximately seventy rabbis whom he flew to Washington, urging Jews and Muslims to "take bold steps toward mutual forgiveness and reconciliation."[17] The gathering was apparently the king's follow-up to a declaration issued during the celebration of Ramadan denouncing terrorism practiced under the banner of Islam. At an international conference convened by Abdullah in July, 180 Muslim religious leaders from both the Sunni and Shiite branches denounced the issuance of fatwas by those acting outside traditional practice. As the king explained: "Muslims from every branch of Islam can now assert without doubt or hesitation that a fatwah calling for the killing of innocent civilians—no matter what nationality or religion, Muslim or Jew, Arab or Israeli—is a violation of the most fundamental principles of Islam."[18] Weeks later, when suicide bomb attacks on three Amman hotels killed fifty-seven civilians, thousands of Jordanians took to the streets to demonstrate their disgust at the murders.

Overall, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza was clearly the proximate cause of the Mubarak initiative and most likely a substantial factor in Kuwait's reassessment and King Abdullah's anti-terrorism campaign. Both Egypt and Jordan have made strategic decisions—largely based on their need for good relations with Washington—to develop normal relations with Israel and both can

17. Charles A Radin, "Jordan's King Extends Hand to Jews," *Boston Globe*, September 22, 2005.

18. Ibid.

benefit from cooperative dealings with the Israelis in countering regional terrorist threats. Kuwait may be at an earlier stage in the same diplomatic evolution. Israeli actions that are viewed in the region as positive make it easier for Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait to do what their interests suggest. Periods of heightened tension, on the other hand, turn these relationships into ones characterized by the term "cold peace."

In party elections conducted during the second week of November, Israel's Labor Party stunned the country, Ariel Sharon, and itself by ousting Sharon's coalition partner Shimon Peres as its leader and electing in his stead Amir Peretz. Here was the left-wing director of the Histadrut union, an avowed "peacenik" who conceives of the occupation as immoral. Above all, he was avowedly committed to taking Labor out of Peres' coalition alliance with Likud and made this a central tenet of his campaign.

Peretz is a man easily underestimated but not easily oversimplified. With his open-necked blue sport-shirts and thick Stalinist moustache, he looks like a transplanted '30s-style radical. He is Moroccan by birth, one of the ethnic groups that formed the core of Menachem Begin's Sephardi constituency. As refugees from the Arab world they were poor, but Labor's intellectual socialism and European orientation never reached them. Peretz wants to change that. "This is the moment we bury the ethnic demon in Israel," he told his supporters. To another interviewer, Peretz asserted, "I would like to be the Menachem Begin of the Labor Party, to return it to the social values and support of the people. If I receive from the people the same 'train ticket' that they once gave to Begin, I intend to travel with it towards peace."[19] He speaks of occupation in words rarely heard since the start of Intifada 2, describing it as "an immoral act, first of all.

19. Ami Isseroff, "Biography of Amir Peretz," Zionism and Israel—Biographies, *The Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Zionism and Israel*.

The occupation in my view is not a territorial question, but one of morality. I want to end the occupation not because of international or Palestinian pressure, but because I see it as an Israeli interest."[20]

Coalition politics plays funny games with the most ideological of people. When the March election made Kadima and Labor the two largest Knesset blocs, Olmert asked Peretz to serve in his cabinet, as defense minister no less. Peretz suddenly appeared content to keep some West Bank settlements on the basis of unilateral action instead of his cherished negotiations.

The essence of Sharon's planning for the months ahead thus came quickly into focus. First, leave the Likud. Second, cast the broadest possible net so that the new party—which he soon named "Kadima" (Forward)—wins enough Knesset seats not only to beat Likud, but to also make himself and not Peretz the logical choice to form a new government. Third, sit tight on the West Bank while awaiting the summons to begin Road Map talks. Fourth, use the PA's inability to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorist organizations and the rising political power of Hamas to resist pressure that may develop for a rapid and unsatisfactory deal. Fifth, use the security wall and other construction to create facts on the ground with respect to the settlements he wanted to keep and Jerusalem, which he did not wish to share. Such should have helped him wear down the Palestinian leadership to the point where they would be willing to make pivotal concessions on such issues as the West Bank settlement blocs and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel. In the end, Sharon would have defined the borders of the Jewish state of Israel.

Sharon's decision to leave the Likud produced stunning initial numbers. A poll published in *Yediot Achronnot*—the nation's larg-

20. BBC News, "Profile: Amir Peretz," 13 November 2005, 12:59 GMT.

est daily—showed Kadima winning thirty-three Knesset seats, Labor garnering twenty-six, and the Likud falling off a cliff from its current forty seats to twelve. Kadima climbed even higher in the weeks that followed before appearing to settle in the mid–high thirties. Astonishingly, after Sharon's massive stroke, Kadima climbed to over forty Knesset mandates in the polls, though one suspected that once Netanyahu began playing the theme that unilateral disengagement had turned Hamas into a dangerous power, the spread would narrow. Shimon Peres announced he was leaving Labor to support Sharon after a political association of well over half a century. He was soon running high on the Kadima ticket, a candidate for deputy prime minister. Further, Sharon appeared to be draining Likud of its top leadership. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, the Iranian-born hard-liner, first declared his candidacy for the top spot in the Likud. But when he continued to trail Netanyahu badly, Mofaz—obviously banking on a senior cabinet post in the next government—joined Sharon. To the consternation of his former mates, so too did Tzachi Hanegbi, one of only five cabinet ministers to have voted in August against authorizing the pullout to begin. At the time of his defection, Hanegbi was serving as head of the Likud Central Committee and acting party chairman. He offered a disarmingly candid explanation for his move: "What Sharon will do in the next four years won't be done by any national leader in the next 30 years."[21]

On December 18, 2005, Sharon suffered a mild stroke while driving to his farm in the Negev. Doctors at the Hadassah-Ein Kerem Hospital in Jerusalem described the stroke as nondebilitating, but days later announced that a small hole had been found in the prime minister's heart—the likely cause of the blood clot

21. Robert Rosenberg, "Every Man for Himself," *Today's Situation from Ariga*, December 7, 2005.

responsible for the stroke—and that a procedure had been scheduled for January 5 to repair it. Mr. Sharon had been put on blood-thinner medication to prevent further clotting. Upon learning of the initial stroke, jubilant Palestinian militia members in Gaza celebrated by firing their weapons into the air; a seemingly breathless commentator on the *Haaretz* website predicted that, were Sharon to be removed by illness from the scene, "the entire political system would be thrown into an insane whirlwind reshuffling all the cards."[22] Then, on January 4, 2006, the day before his scheduled minor procedure, Sharon suffered a massive debilitating stroke and hemorrhage, removing him from the political scene. Olmert became acting prime minister and would soon be chosen to replace Sharon atop the Kadima ticket. Supporters of unilateral disengagement feared the worst.

There are, however, a number of reasons to suggest that much of the early "cult of the personality" analysis was off base. True Sharon had enormous physical magnetism—the hospital listed him as 5 feet, 7 inches tall and 318 pounds. True he had great political energy. True he had freed Israel form the jaws of Intifada 2 while engaging international support by withdrawing from the Gaza Strip. And true he had brought into being an apparently viable political party formed in his own image.

Even before he left Likud, however, many close observers of the political scene were crediting Sharon less with having invented a new political constituency than with having located and awoken the dormant political center. Perhaps the most astute of these observers is Yehuda Ben-Meir, a veteran of the National Religious Party, former Knesset member, and commentator on the fusion of religion and politics in Israeli society.

22. Greg Myre, "A Mild Stroke Sends Sharon to the Hospital," *New York Times*, December 19, 2005.

Addressing the Brandeis conference in October 2005, Ben-Meir suggested that, during his five years in office, Sharon had found the political majority even as they had found him. With his disengagement initiative, he had "broken the genetic code" of the new Israeli majority just as Franklin Roosevelt, in an earlier day, had broken through isolationism with lend-lease and the destroyer deal to find the genetic code of the new internationalism.

Ben-Meir offered six conclusions that Sharon and the New Center had reached as part of their union, each pointing toward a policy initiative:

1. They were disillusioned with the Palestinians as negotiating partners. This owed itself to the rise of terrorist organizations alongside the PA's fragmentation, corruption, and inability to provide law and order, all embodied in the ineffectual presidency of Abu Mazen. Per this assessment, Israel cannot wait for the Palestinians to begin fixing things before addressing pressing occupation-related issues.
2. There existed the conviction that demography outweighs geography. The Israeli settlement policy must reflect the fact that the question is not what God defined as the Land of Israel, but who lives there now. With Palestinians growing faster than Jewish Israelis, the character of the state is at risk and needs to be secured.
3. Separation remains the essence of Israeli policy. As Rabin once declared, "We are here; they are there." The security fence is supported among Israelis polled, by 82.4 percent, and will continue.
4. After Gaza, future unilateral withdrawals are fraught with danger. The Palestinians see them as rewards for terrorism. Their response will be to practice more terrorism, and so fu-

ture disengagements must be considered as a measure affecting security both as a fact on the ground and as it relates to the perception of the other side.

5. When Israel does take unilateral steps, it is entitled to something in return from third parties. Israel received at least two important declarations from President Bush. Additional support should accompany additional steps as part of a quid pro quo.
6. Defense and security preclude a complete return to the 1967 borders. The big settlement blocs must be kept as vital to Israeli security interests. Paradoxically, however, long-run and pervasive security can only be achieved by a negotiated peace.[23]

One can quibble with particular items on Ben-Meir's list. The belief, for example, that future unilateral disengagement is fraught with danger may come as a surprise to Mr. Olmert, who endorsed the concept in his preelection "convergences" address, in which he said he would seek to determine Israel's final borders unilaterally during his four-year term. And getting nice things from the United States hardly seems like cracking a political genome code. But Ben-Meir's overall thesis—that Sharon and an apparent Israeli plurality of the center seemed to find each other on a range of security issues during his five years in office and that this agreement produced extremely strong political ties—is fundamentally on point. The question of whether these ties are being institutionalized through the new mechanism of Kadima to the point where they will survive both the sudden removal of Sharon from the scene and the earthquake of the January 2006

23. Speech presented by Yehuda Ben-Meir on October 20, 2005, at Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, "Israel and the Palestinians: The Road Ahead."

Hamas electoral victory, may or may not have been answered by the campaign itself. If the American experience is any example, one may argue that the collective security approach developed by Franklin Roosevelt to run the Second World War had been institutionalized by war's end, leading to a seamless hand-off to Harry Truman. Had Sharon remained personally on the political scene, no answer to the question need immediately have been sought. Now that he is gone, it has suddenly become the dominant question in Israeli politics. In the new situation, Olmert could become an Israeli Harry Truman. On the other hand, he could instead become an Israeli Andrew Johnson, whose inability to institutionalize Abraham Lincoln's vision of a forgiving but just reconstruction helped doom the nation to a century of racial and sectional grief.

On December 15, 2005, Hamas dealt a punishing blow to Fatah and the PA with a strong showing in municipal elections conducted on the West Bank, signaling what was to come in the legislative council elections of January 2006. The former organization—branded as a terrorist group by Israel, the United States, and the European Union—won thirteen of the fifteen seats up for grabs in Nablus, squeaked by in Jenin, and easily won in El Bireh, a suburb of Ramallah, while Fatah prevailed in Ramallah proper. Overall, Fatah captured 35 percent of the seats at stake while Hamas secured 26 percent. Having earlier won municipal elections in Bethlehem and Qalqilya, Hamas is now established as a political force on the West Bank, where Israeli security forces thought they had uprooted most of the organization's leadership structure, providing a complement to its even stronger position in Gaza. The *New York Times* described public reaction in two big cities: "In Nablus, thousands of Hamas members and supporters gathered in the city center chanting 'God is great.' The crowd carried the new mayor of the city, Ali Yaish—the wealthy owner of a Mercedes dealership—on their shoulders. In Jenin, marchers

held up copies of the Koran and chanted, 'To Jerusalem we march, martyrs by the millions.'"[24]

A harbinger of things to come for Abu Mazen occurred just before dawn on September 5, when a convoy of about twenty vehicles armed with assault rifles and anti-tank grenades attacked the Gaza home of Major General Mousa Arafat, head of Palestinian Public Security Service in the Gaza Strip and a cousin of the late Yasser. Following a gunfight with Arafat's bodyguards, the intruders hauled the general outside in his pajamas and pumped thirteen bullets into his body and one into his head. The word was they were punishing his corruption.[25] The attackers were widely believed to be not from Hamas but from a dissident Fatah faction.

Gaza quickly became an advertisement for Abu Mazen's weakness as militias representing political factions, gangs, clans, or ad hoc bands of the criminally unemployed ran wild. Many were seeking and obtaining jobs with the PA SF; others simply had their names added to the PA employment rolls despite the fact that Abu Mazen had been warned his actions were bankrupting the government and discouraging foreign assistance. During the closing weeks of the campaign the United States dumped a reported $1.9 million into "short-term projects" for potential Abu Mazen supporters, but it proved of little avail.

The December results augured poorly for Fatah's prospects in the legislative council elections held January 25. Abu Mazen committed a serious political blunder by discarding the results of a summer primary that had showed voters ready to reject the old

24. Steven Erlanger, "Hamas Surges In West Bank; Blow to Fatah," *New York Times*, December 17, 2005.

25. Steven Erlanger, "Arafat's Former Security Chief Is Killed by Gunmen in Gaza," *New York Times*, September 7, 2005; and Tim Butcher, "Brutal Murder of Arafat's Cousin Endangers Gaza Peace Pact," *Daily Telegraph* (London), September 8, 2005.

"Tunisia crowd" of former Arafat confidants in favor of younger, less demonstrably corrupt candidates. Now the younger Fatah loyalists—led by top security or former security officials Jibril Rajoub on the West Bank and Mohammed Dahlan in Gaza—moved to submit their alternative list designed to push the Abu Mazen ticket off the ballot, or to at least secure a compromise list of candidates.

The political insurgents placed the jailed Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti at the head of their list, a move Abu Mazen quickly copied. Previously, Barghouti had mounted a campaign from prison against Abu Mazen's initial election as Arafat's successor but was persuaded that Palestinian unity was the highest priority at the moment and dropped out of the earlier race. Now Abu Mazen was on the defensive and seeking to compromise with the rebels in order to avoid splitting the Fatah vote. By late December the parties had reached agreement on a "compromise" list headed by Barghouti, a list where most of the compromising had been done by Abu Mazen.[26]

Barghouti was at the time of his "nomination" serving a total of five life sentences for plus forty years for his involvement in three terrorist incidents in which a total of five people had died. From his prison cell he sought to reach out to Hamas sympathizers by emphasizing their issues—corruption, political reform, making sure Israel pulls back from the West Bank and Jerusalem. "Hamas is not an alternative to the Fatah movement, but a partner," he proclaimed. "Partners in the field, partners in parliament."

But Hamas had something far more precious than Barghouti's political embrace: an electoral system stacked in its favor. In the contest sixty-six seats were divided on the basis of votes for the

26. To cite one source on the compromise: Matthew Gutman, "Fatah Members Warn of War within Party: Compromise List Described as Proof of 'Alzheimer-ridden' Leadership," *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2005.

national lists while in sixteen separate districts with a total of sixty-six seats also at stake voters could vote as many times as there were seats up for grabs. In these districts the disciplined Hamas ran only enough candidates to compete for each seat while Fatah members running against the official Fatah slate crowded the ballots with a surfeit of candidates, thus dividing the Fatah vote. The result: Hamas candidates won 44 percent of the vote but won 56 percent of the seats; Fatah candidates polled 42 percent of the vote but won only 34 percent of the seats.

As the top man on the Fatah list, Barghouti, of course, won election to the legislature. A total of fourteen members of the Palestinian governing body found themselves incarcerated on Election Day, including ten members of the winning party, Hamas. Palestinian apologists immediately began fueling rumors of untapped moderation up and down the Hamas hierarchy. But those in the Israeli mainstream weren't buying. To them the prospect of a Palestinian negotiating partner seemed ever more remote and proposals for unilateral disengagement ever more compelling.