

# Sharon's Legacy in Action

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At the present, Western world seems still under the spell of the legend of Ariel Sharon, who, so the story goes, has brought a gigantic change in Israeli policy - from expansion and occupation to moderation and concessions a vision to be further implemented by his successor, Ehud Olmert. Since the evacuation of the Gaza Strip settlements, the dominant Western narrative has been that Israel has done its part towards ending the occupation and declared its readiness to take further steps, and that now it is the Palestinian's turn to show that they are able to live in peace with their well intending neighbor.

How did it happen that Sharon, the most brutal, cynical, racist and manipulative leader Israel has ever had, ended his political career as a legendary peace hero? The answer, I believe, is that Sharon has not changed. Rather, the myth built around him reflects the present omnipotence of the propaganda system, which, to paraphrase a notion of Chomsky's, has reached perfection in manufacturing consciousness.

The magic that transformed Sharon in the eyes of the world has been the evacuation of the Gaza settlements. I will return to this point and argue that even this, Sharon did not do out of his own will, but because of unprecedented pressure on him by the U.S. In any case, Sharon clarified right from the start that the evacuation of the settlements does not mean letting Gaza free. The disengagement plan, published in the Israeli papers in April 16, 2004, specified in advance that "Israel will supervise and guard the external envelope on land, will maintain exclusive control in the air space of Gaza, and will continue to conduct military activities in the sea space of the Gaza Strip"[1].

Let us look briefly at Sharon's other record.

During his four years in office, Sharon stalled any chance of negotiations with the Palestinians:

-In 2003 - the road map period -the Palestinians accepted the plan and declared a cease fire, but while the Western world was celebrating the new era of peace, the Israeli army, under Sharon, intensified its policy of assassinations, maintained the daily harassment of the occupied Palestinians, and eventually declared an all-out-war on Hamas, killing all its first rank of military and political leaders.

-Later, as the Western world was holding its breath again, in a year and a half of waiting for the planned Gaza pullout, Sharon did everything possible to fail the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, who was elected in January 2005. Sharon declared that Abbas is not a

suitable partner (because he does not fight terror) and turned down all his offers of renewed negotiations.

The daily reality of the Palestinians in the occupied territories was never as grim as in the period of Sharon.

-In the West Bank, Sharon started a massive project of ethnic cleansing in the areas bordering with Israel. His wall project robs the land of the Palestinian villages in these areas, imprisons whole towns, and leaves their residents with no means of sustenance. If the project continues, many of the 400.000 Palestinians affected by it will have to leave and seek their livelihood in the outskirts of cities in the center of the West Bank, as happened already in northern West Bank town of Qalqilia.

-The Israeli settlements were evacuated from the Gaza Strip, but the Strip remains a big prison, completely sealed from the outside world, nearing starvation and terrorized from land, sea and air by the Israeli army.

The question that preoccupied the Israeli political and military elites since the seizure of the Palestinian territories in 1967, was how to maintain maximum area of land with minimum number of Palestinians. The Labor party's Alon plan, which was realized in Oslo, was to keep about 40% of the West Bank, but allow the Palestinians autonomy in the other 60%. However, Barak and Sharon destroyed the Oslo arrangements. The model that Israel has developed under Sharon is a complex system of prisons. The Palestinians are being pushed into locked and sealed enclaves, fully controlled from the outside by the Israeli army, who enters the enclaves at will. As far as I know this imprisonment of a whole people is an unprecedented model of occupation, and it is being executed with frightening speed and efficiency.

At the same time, what Sharon has brought to perfection was the manufacturing of consciousness, showing that war can be always marketed as the tireless pursuit of peace. He proved that Israel can imprison the Palestinians, bombard them from the air, steal their land in the West Bank, stall any chance for peace, and still be hailed by the Western world as the peaceful side in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Sharon has now retired from political life, but that alone does not bid any change. Sharon's legacy is well alive. It has brewed for over a decade in the Israeli military, which, in effect, is the dominant factor in Israeli politics.

The military is the most stable - and most dangerous - political factor in Israel. As an Israeli analyst stated it already in 2001, "in the last six years, since October 1995, there were five prime ministers and six defense ministers, but only two chiefs-of-staff."<sup>[2]</sup> Israeli military and political systems have always been closely intertwined, with generals moving from the army straight to the government, but the army's political status was further solidified during Sharon's cadency. It is often apparent that the real decisions are made by the military rather than the political echelon. Military seniors brief the press (they capture at least half of the news space in the Israeli media), and brief and shape the views of foreign diplomats; they go abroad on diplomatic missions, outline political plans for the government, and express their political views on any occasion.

In contrast to the military's stability, the Israeli political system is in a gradual process of disintegration. In a World Bank report of April 2005, Israel is found to be one of the most

corrupt and least efficient in the Western world, second only to Italy in the government corruption index, and lowest in the index of political stability.[3] Sharon personally was associated, together with his sons, with severe bribery charges that have never reached the court. The new party that Sharon has founded, Kadima, and which now heads the government, is a hierarchical conglomeration of individuals with no party institutions or local branches. Its guidelines, published in November 22, 2005, enable its leader to bypass all standard democratic processes and to appoint the list of the party's candidates to the parliament without voting or approval of any party body.[4]

The Labor party has not been able to offer an alternative. In the last two Israeli elections, Labor elected dovish candidates for prime minister Amram Mitzna in 2003, and Amir Peretz in 2006. Both were received initially with enormous enthusiasm, but were immediately silenced by their party and campaign advisors and by self imposed censorship, aiming to situate themselves "at the center of the political map". Soon, their program became indistinguishable from that of Sharon. Peretz even declared that on "foreign and security" matters he will do exactly as Sharon, or later Olmert, and he only differs from them on social issues. Thus, these candidates helped convince the Israeli voters that Sharon's way is the right way. In recent years, there has never been a substantial left-wing opposition to the rule of Sharon and the generals, since after the elections, Labor would always join the government, providing the dovish image that the generals need for the international show.

With the collapse of the political system, the army remains the body that shapes and executes Israel's policies, and as is already obvious in the few months since Sharon left office, the army is determined to carry out his legacy, together with Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert. For this, it is essential that whatever Israel does be packaged as painful concessions. Right now, we are at the dawn of a new "peace plan" promoted by Olmert.

Olmert may have coined the name of this plan, but the copyright belongs to Sharon. On January 2nd 2006, shortly before Sharon left office, the Israeli paper Ma'ariv disclosed the plan he intended to present for the West Bank. The plan rests on US eventual acknowledgment that the Road Map was stalemated - and that in fact it has always been a "non-starter", given that (according to Israel's official line), there has never been a genuine Palestinian partner for peace. This was still before the Palestinian elections that brought Hamas to power, but from Israel's perspective no Palestinian leadership was ever an appropriate partner. Sharon argued that the PA under Abbas failed to fulfill its obligations to combat the terror network. In the absence of a suitable partner, Israel should set its borders unilaterally - that is to say, decide for itself how much Palestinian land it needs to take, and disengage from the rest. According to this plan, negotiations with the U.S. should lead to a "signed agreement with Washington that determines the final eastern border of Israel." The American-Israeli agreement will include "fast completion of the fence [wall]... that would become a real border fence." [5]

On the eve of the Israeli elections Olmert publicly unveiled the plan, which later became the official plan of the new Israeli government, under the title *consolidation*, or *convergence*. He emphasized that Israel's new border would correspond to the route of the Wall, which would be completed before the disengagement starts.[6] To bring the plan to fruition, the wall would have to move even further east than its present route, and Olmert is explicit in outlining his views on its final location. He wants to make sure that "Israel holds on to [the settlements of] Ariel, Ma'aleh Adumim, the Jerusalem envelope and Gush Etzion," as well as establishing Israeli control in the Jordan Valley.[7] A glance at the map would reveal that the

areas Israel would annex unilaterally under this plan amount to about 40% of the West Bank.

Olmert believes that circumstances are currently favorable for enforcing this “solution” on the Palestinians, because following Hamas’ victory in the Palestinian election it should become even more evident to the world that there is no Palestinian partner for peace negotiations. He said:

“There is now a ‘window of opportunity’ for reaching an international agreement on setting the border, in the wake of Hamas’ rise to power and... support following the Gaza pullout.”[8]

At the level of declaration, the plan includes potential evacuation of settlements east of the new border. However, unlike the Gaza disengagement plan, no time table is set for this intended evacuation, and no list of the settlements to be evacuated was published. In any case, should a scenario of evacuation arise, the plan is to keep the West Bank Palestinian enclaves under full Israeli control, as happened in Gaza. Olmert was explicit about this in the public announcement of his plan. The arrangements after the disengagement will “provide the Israel Defense Forces with freedom of action in the West Bank, similar to the post-disengagement situation in the Gaza Strip.”[9]

Olmert’s plan, then, is to turn Sharon’s legacy into reality annex to Israel 40% of the West Bank and apply the Gaza model of prison to the remaining Palestinian enclaves. But Olmert is Israel’s new man of peace.

These are difficult times, when Sharon’s legacy seems to be winning, with no barriers of international law or justice on its road of destruction.

Less than two years ago, on July 9 2004, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued its ruling on the “Legal Consequence of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”. The court found the current route of the wall to be a serious and egregious violation of international law. The first reactions in Israel were of worried concern. In mid August 2004, Attorney General Menachem Mazuz presented the government with a report stating: “It is hard to exaggerate the negative ramifications the International Court ruling will have on Israel on many levels, even on matters that lie beyond the separation fence. The decision creates a political reality for Israel on the international level, that may be used to expedite actions against Israel in international forums, to the point that they may result in sanctions.”[10] Israel hastened to clarify that the wall is a temporary security barrier, which in no way would determine facts on the ground. But in the current political atmosphere, Israel declares it intends to make this wall its border, and no European government even blinks.

Still a year ago, the Western world was celebrating the dawn of democracy in the Middle East. Following Arafat’s departure, the Palestinians were engaging in a real election campaign. Hamas declared its intention to participate in the elections, and to shift from armed struggle to working in the political arena. One would think that this would be viewed as an encouraging and positive development after years of bloodshed. Indeed, the U.S. insisted on the election taking place, despite Israel’s objections. But alas, the Palestinians have elected the wrong party. How natural it seems to the Western world that the Palestinian people should be collectively punished for their wrong understanding of democracy. The U.S. dictates, and Europe agrees that all aid to Palestinians should be cut,

leaving them close to starvation, with the remaining infra-structure and health system crumbling.

Nevertheless, the last few years were not just years of victory for Israel's expansion. From the long run perspective of maintaining Israel's occupation of the West Bank, the evacuation of the Gaza settlements was a defeat.

A prevailing view in critical circles is that Sharon decided to evacuate the Gaza settlements because maintaining them was too costly, and he decided to focus efforts on his central goal of keeping the West Bank and expanding its settlements. But, in fact, there is no real evidence for this view.

Of course, the occupation of Gaza has always been costly, and even from the perspective of the most committed Israeli expansionists, Israel does not need this piece of land, one of the most densely populated in the world, and lacking any natural resources. The problem is that one cannot let Gaza free, if one wants to keep the West Bank. A third of the occupied Palestinians live in the Gaza strip. If they are given freedom, they would become the center of Palestinian struggle for liberation, with free access to the Western and Arab world. To control the West Bank, Israel had to stick to Gaza. And once it is clear that Gaza needs to be occupied and controlled, the previous model of occupation was the optimal choice. The Strip was controlled from the inside by the army, and the settlements provided the support system for the army, and the moral justification for the soldiers' brutal job of occupation. It makes their presence there a mission of protecting the homeland. Control from the outside may be cheaper, but in the long run, it has no guarantee of success.

Furthermore, since the Oslo years, the settlements were conceived both locally and internationally as a tragic problem that, despite Israel's good intentions to end the occupation, cannot be solved. This useful myth was broken with the evacuation of the Gaza settlements, which showed how easy it is, in fact, to evacuate settlements, and how big the support is in Israeli society for doing that.

Although I cannot go into the details here, I argue in *I'heritage de Sharon*,<sup>[11]</sup> that Sharon did not evacuate the Gaza settlements out of his own will, but rather, that he was forced to do so. Sharon cooked up his disengagement plan as a means to gain time, at the peak of international pressure that followed Israel's sabotaging of the road map and its construction of the West Bank wall. Still, at every moment since then, till the very end, he was looking for ways to sneak out of this commitment, as he did with all his commitments before. But this time he was forced to actually carry it out by the Bush administration. Though it was kept fully behind the screens, the pressure was quite massive, including military sanctions. The official pretext for the sanctions was Israel's arm sale to China, but in previous occasions, the crisis was over as soon as Israel agreed to cancel the deal. This time, the sanctions were unprecedented, and lasted until the signing of the crossing agreement in November 2005.

The story of the Gaza evacuation shows that international pressure can force Israel into concessions. I argue there (*I'heritage de Sharon*) that the reason the U.S. exerted pressure on Israel, for the first time in recent history, was because at that time, as the U.S. was sinking in the mire of Iraq, it was impossible to ignore the widespread global discontent over Israel's policies and unswerving US support of them. (For example, in a comprehensive European poll, the majority viewed Israel as the country most threatening to world peace.<sup>[12]</sup>) The US had to yield to public opinion.

From the U.S. perspective, its goal of appeasing international pressure had been achieved with the evacuation of the Gaza settlements. Western leaders and media were euphoric over the new developments in the Middle East. As long as international calm is maintained, Palestinian suffering plays no role in US calculations. The U.S. administration has made it clear “to its friends in Europe and the Arab world that Israel has fulfilled its part of the process, and now it is time to leave Israel alone and expect the Palestinians to do their part.”[13]

Nevertheless the fact that pressure was put on Israel even for a short while, also shows the limits of power and propaganda. Despite the apparent success of pro Israeli lobbies in silencing any criticism of Israeli policies in Western political discourse, the Palestinian struggle for justice has penetrated global consciousness. This begins with the Palestinian people, who have withstood years of brutal oppression and through their daily endurance, organizing and resistance, have managed to keep the Palestinian cause alive, something that not all oppressed nations have managed to do. It continues with international struggle solidarity movements that send their people to the occupied territories and stand in vigils at home, professors signing boycott petitions, subjecting themselves to daily harassment, a few courageous journalists that insist on covering the truth, against the pressure of acquiescent media and pro-Israel lobbies. Often this struggle seems futile, but still it has penetrated global consciousness. It is this collective consciousness that eventually forced the U.S. to pressure Israel into some, albeit limited, concessions. . The Palestinian cause can be silenced for a while, as is happening now, but it will resurface.

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## **Notes**

[1] Section III, *Security reality after the evacuation*, clause 1. The published plan is available at:

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=416024&contrassID=1&subContrassID=1&sbSubContrassID=0&listSrc=Y>.

[2] Amir Oren, *Ha'aretz*, October 19, 2001.

[3] Ora Coren, Israel ranks among most corrupt in West, *Ha'aretz*, April 8, 2005.

[4] Gil Hoffman, 'National Responsibility' name of PM's new party, *Jerusalem Post*, November 23, 2005.

[5] Amnon Dankner and Ben Kaspit, The road blast Sharon's new initiative, *Ma'ariv*, January 2 2006 (Hebrew; [www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/027/938.html](http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/027/938.html)).

[6] Aluf Benn and Yossi Verter, "Olmert to Offer Settlers: Expand blocs, cut outposts," *Ha'aretz*, March 3 2006.. [7] Olmert said: "I believe that in four years' time, Israel will be disengaged from the vast majority of the Palestinian population, within new borders, with the route of the fence - which until now has been a security fence - adjusted to the new line of the permanent borders."

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Yuval Yoaz, Hague fence ruling may lead to sanctions, *Ha'aretz*, August 19, 2004.

[11] L'Héritage de Sharon, Détruire La Palestine, Suite, La Fabrique, Paris, April 2006. An extended version will appear in English as *The Road Map to Nowhere Israel/Palestine since 2003*, Verso, July 2003.

[12] Thomas Fuller, *Herald Tribune*, October 31 2003.

[13] Aluf Benn, "Leaving Gaza - The Day After," *Ha'aretz*, September 12 2005.

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