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A PALESTINIAN VIEW

At a crossroads

by Hisham Ahmed

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The absence of Ariel Sharon from political life puts the Palestinian question at a crossroads.

On the one hand, there is now a real opportunity for potential Israeli leaders to capture the moment, shift gears and enter into a genuine peace process. Palestinian memory is impregnated with Sharon's role as the butcher of Kibya and Sabra and Shatila. When Palestinians think of Sharon they think of settlements; they think of the cantonization of their cities, towns, villages and refugee camps, particularly after the erection of this abhorrent apartheid wall. In other words, Sharon's legacy among Palestinians is a most bitter, painful and bloody one. Without him, potential Israeli leaders have an opportunity to reverse the trend and take on board the lesson that should have been learned from Sharon: brutal confrontation will not create peace, security and stability for Israelis.

On the other hand, there is widespread concern among Palestinians that with this sudden absence of Sharon from political life, newly emerging Israeli leaders will simply rush to compete with each other over who can be tougher with the Palestinians to boost their popularity ahead of the upcoming Israeli elections in March. That is to say, Palestinians are worried that each potential Israeli leader will try to continue the destructive pattern set by Sharon over the years.

Right now, there is a possibility that a peace process might again raise expectations among Palestinians. People are willing to believe that with Sharon goes the root cause of the outbreak of the Aqsa Intifada, i.e., the provocation at the Aqsa Mosque, and the many oppressive Israeli measures that followed. Should new Israeli leaders seek to adhere to the Sharonite formula for gaining popularity, however, the frustration and wave of dashed expectations is likely to presage an even greater intensification of the cycle of violence. Palestinians are highly cognizant of the fact that their lives must not be used as an electoral tool.

The immediate indicator for which direction the new Israeli era is likely to head is the question of the Palestinian Legislative Council elections this month. A hardline policy will prohibit Palestinians from exercising their democratic rights by prohibiting voting and campaigning in Jerusalem. The contrary would be a signal that the new Israeli leadership is following a policy of calm rather than escalation. In addition, the threats that were heard from Sharon and his government to hamper Palestinian elections because of the participation of Hamas must also stop. Palestinians must be allowed to vote freely and the whole spectrum of choices. Should the Israeli leadership acknowledge this right, it would be a sign that Israel is taking its first steps toward recognizing the rights of the other.

In Israel, the absence of Sharon raises first of all the question of what will happen with his new party, Kadima, a party without institutions that was primarily built around the personality of Sharon. That question in turn leads to the more important issue now facing Israeli society, i.e., whether to continue in the footsteps of a military man who only brought greater insecurity and instability to Israeli society, especially in the last five years, or to engage in a serious bout of soul-searching and reach a consensus to pursue a more tranquil, less occupation-oriented way of political behavior.

The sudden absence of Sharon from political life has put the future of the entire region to the test. It is a test that will be most fully impacted in the months and years to come by the measures and decisions taken now by those who assume power in Israel.- Published 9/1/2006 (c) bitterlemons.org

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AN ISRAELI VIEW

Not the end of an era