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Viewpoint

Ariel Sharon and the Fate of Local, Regional and International Peace

Lasting solutions will require creativity, intuition and innovation.

by [Hisham Ahmed](#)

A widely held view today is that peace is more distant from the Middle East than it has ever been in the recent past. The main protagonists in the conflict, Palestinians and Israelis, are incurring a higher rate of casualties, and both Palestinian and Israeli societies are finding themselves caught in a seemingly endless dilemma.

For their part, Palestinians' life is anything but normal and/or ordinary. For more than two years, they have been kept under tight siege by the Israeli occupation authorities, rendering their ability to move around from one location to another either life threatening and/or untenable. The horror Palestinians have been subjected to, has not only reminded them of the massacres and the Nakbah (1948 Catastrophe) they have endured, but it has also ruptured the fragile dream they have been nurturing of a peaceful solution to the conflict with the Israelis.

On the other hand, Israelis may have never felt the bitter taste of insecurity as much as they have recently. The fear of Palestinian attacks has never been more concrete. No Israeli finds him/herself safe or immune from danger. In essence, the traumas of the conflict for Palestinians and Israelis have rarely been as crystal clear. Vulnerability has become mutual for both societies, indeed.

Different Responses to Camp David

Yet, Palestinians and Israelis have responded differently to the collapse of the desired peace, particularly since the failure of the Camp David talks, summer 2000. Despairing of a seven-year-old political process that had not succeeded in ridding them of a rampant, ever-entrenched Israeli occupation, and believing that the Lebanese model of successful resistance to occupation can be replicated, the Palestinians launched the al-Aqsa Intifada with

stronger vigor and determination than previous Intifadas have known. The tools, tactics and objectives they have employed and adopted were further refined and more goal-oriented than the symbolic measures of stone-throwing, for example, that characterized the 1987 Intifada. The number of casualties among Israelis continued to be on the rise and, while Palestinians did not aspire to achieve a strategic balance of power with their Israeli rival, they no doubt succeeded in achieving a strategic balance of terror. No longer did Palestinians accept to be the only recipients of injury and death.

Sharon the Savior!

Israelis, who have felt the depth of fear and horror, calculated that their salvation would be in the election of Ariel Sharon as prime minister, given his renowned reputation as a great general and a fierce warrior. To the increasingly fearful Israelis, Sharon represented their greatest and last hope for reaching a state of security and safety. Sharon's history of swift, decisive moves against Palestinians certainly made him look like the figure capable of saving Israeli lives from Palestinian attacks. The inability of his predecessor, Ehud Barak, to quell the Palestinian Intifada in spite of his distinct record as a "general of tough missions," helped make Sharon look like the only viable option that could deliver on his promise of providing Israelis with the stability and security they badly lack. In effect, Sharon, who is viewed to have been the prime instigator of the Intifada as a result of his provocative visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, made the Intifada the very process without which he could not achieve his strategic objectives. While opening a can of worms for Barak in late September 2000, which he himself inherited, Sharon capitalized on the possibility of creating the kind of peace he wants by liquidating and tarnishing any bases of Palestinian resistance. Hence, his determined effort to bring peace to the Israelis through concerted war on the Palestinians.

However, the winds of good fortune may not blow in the direction of the ships of even great warriors like Sharon. The iron-fist policy he has adopted against the Palestinians, notwithstanding, has caused the number of Israeli casualties to rise dramatically since he assumed office. The ratio of deaths among Israelis compared to those among Palestinians dropped to 1-3 from 1-10 and 1-15 under his predecessors, Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu, respectively. The last hope, which Sharon symbolized for many Israelis, became their greatest nightmare. This disillusionment, among other reasons, led some army officers to consider refusing service in the occupied territories at the cost of punishment. The psycho-political, psychosocial and economic map of Israeli society has not witnessed similar frailty before. Needless to say, the security promised to the Israelis has encountered the same fate as the peace their government had promised to achieve before the Intifada.

Sharon - The Great Mobilizer of Palestinian Society

The Palestinians have remained steadfast under occupation, despite the fact that Sharon has inflicted on them more harm than they can endure. Sharon is considered better than any other Israeli prime minister before him because he has underlined the ferocity by removing any fake masks off the face of the occupation. Sharon turned out to be more blunt and forthcoming, as far as the oppression of the Palestinians is concerned. Therefore, Palestinian attacks on Israelis became greater in frequency, magnitude and in sophisticated planning, resulting in more widespread casualties.

Rather than quelling or even reducing the vigor of Palestinian resistance, Sharon has served as the greatest mobilizer of Palestinian society against the occupation, in spite of all the damage he has caused. It has no longer become a far-fetched conclusion that Sharon, by virtue of his reckless assault on Palestinians, has created a societal factory of suicide bombers, not only among Muslims, but also among Palestinian Christians, hitherto unaccustomed to consider resorting to such measures. Certainly, rather than opening the door for alternative leaders to replace him, the siege Sharon has imposed on Yasser Arafat, and his destruction of the Palestinian National Authority's presidential compound in Ramallah, served as the greatest campaign of popularization for the president of the PNA. No other Palestinian figure stands a chance of mustering the legitimacy, popularity and symbolism that Arafat possesses.

Fallout Against the Americans

Nevertheless, the ramifications of Sharon's ill-calculated policies and moves have had considerable effects beyond the Palestinian-Israeli arenas. The Arab world is more tarnished, with a perpetually widening gap between the rulers and the ruled. At no other time in the past has the possibility for political upheavals and changes been greater. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the power base of Arab regimes is in great danger, as has been evidenced by the massive demonstrations and protests against Sharon's atrocities, even in the most conservative and traditional Arab societies. The Arab masses' pre-occupation with their hard-earned daily living is turning into boiling frustration and expressions of anger, hate and hostility, not only toward Israel, but also towards the US, for its obdurately unfavorable policies toward the Palestinians. To a large extent, as a function of Sharon's brutalities, the US has become "the enemy." Even the definition of the conflict as a Palestinian-Israeli or Arab-Israeli one has begun to wither, to the benefit of another replacement: "the Palestinian-American" or "Arab-American" conflict. The atmosphere in the Muslim world is not much different: a growing campaign of antagonism toward Israel and the US. Due to its unbending backing of Israeli policies, whatever they are and however they are conducted, it is short-sighted and actually misleading to expect that the anger and frustration will not be reflected on American soil, rendering American interests, not only abroad, but also domestically,

vulnerable and desired targets.

Thanks to Sharon's miscalculations, Israel, which thus far may have been viewed as America's greatest strategic asset in the Middle East, is, with time, becoming America's unbearable burden. The gain derived from the strategic relationship between the US and Israel is being gradually outweighed by the losses. Even an opportunistic individual and/or group that is at issue with the US for other reasons, might manipulate and utilize the grave deterioration in the Middle East to help achieve its objectives, whatever they may be.

Thus, while managing to climb up the ladder of Israeli leadership despite his reputation for brutality, Sharon's promises of security and stability have not been short-lived and fantasy-ridden for Israelis only, but also for the Arab political system in its entirety, as well as for the US. The "euphoria" in Israel following Sharon's latest intrusion into and occupation of Palestinian territories might very well be replaced by the greatest defeat Israel will have to live with, as it previously had in Lebanon, albeit about 20 years after the euphoric sense of victory Sharon thought he had achieved during Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Even if Sharon were to talk about peace in the Middle East, stability does not seem to be near and the image of the US as the broker of peace can only be tarnished further in the Arab world.

Only Military Force

Sharon is determined to manage the conflict with the Palestinians only by military force and not through negotiations. He conditions his involvement in any political process by changing the Palestinian leadership, i.e., by ousting the symbol of Palestinian struggle and nationalism, Arafat. He spares no effort in relying on a strategy of military preponderance against the Palestinians wherever and whenever he can. It is expected, therefore, that his military tendencies will be further entrenched as a function of his feeling of personal exhilaration due to his role in acquiring close to one-third of the seats of the Israeli Knesset for his party in the last elections. Triumphalism combined with his ideological orientation and military background might very well lower his partisan concerns and ambitions while writing, most probably, the last chapter of his political life against the Palestinians, a chapter that will most likely be characterized by more ferocity. After all, he has obtained public trust in a way, which no other Israeli leader has ever done, especially during times of crises. Sharon succeeded in getting re-elected in the midst of one of the bloodiest phases in Israeli history, where Israeli security has almost become null and void. In effect, this is baffling as the state of Israeli security is completely contrary to what Sharon promised the Israelis it would become in the 2001 elections.

Indeed, Sharon possesses the tools, the know-how and the power to inflict irreparable harm and damage onto Palestinian society. And whether this makes him a man of peace or a man of war, he, by his deeds, has made the idea of peace unfathomable, at least for decades to come. Israelis, as well as

Palestinians, and perhaps many others, will have to pay for what Sharon has symbolized, the greatest threat to local, regional and world stability. The “peace of the rulers,” even if superimposed, stands no chance of enforcement and success under the present recipe of conditions and circumstances.

The Power of Reason

Hope for change, however, lies primarily with the ability of Israeli public opinion to view its destiny as one linked with that of the Palestinians, since Sharon can deliver neither security nor stability. Military power may achieve short-term objectives, but lasting solutions certainly require human creativity, intuition and innovation. No form of repression and/or suppression is capable of stopping the Palestinian people’s drive for freedom and independence. The prolongation and deepening of “Sharonism” in Israeli society can only move the clock backward. Without any doubt, the power of reason is bound to have more beneficial, far-reaching effects than the power of weapons. Only when despair dissipates, does hope for the future take over.

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