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Israel's Elections: Diminishing Returns

The Rise of 'Sharonism'

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Despite predictions that Ariel Sharon would win the Israeli elections, his sweeping victory has resonated loudly in Palestinian sectors. Certainly, there is a compelling need to understand the relationship between this cause and effect: Why did Sharon win the elections, and what forces are driving the Israeli electorate? The percentage of Israeli human losses as compared with Palestinian losses were at their highest under the Sharon regime. The ratio of Israeli to Palestinian deaths has narrowed considerably under Sharon to one Israeli for every three Palestinians dead, while under his predecessor, Ehud Barak, the ratio was one to 10, and under Binyamin Netanyahu the ratio was one to 15. Understanding Sharon's success despite this phenomenon is compelling.

There are two Palestinian schools of thought that attempt to explain the current rise of Sharonism. The first suggests that the militarization of the Intifada is the central cause for Sharon's landslide. By this reasoning, the heightened Palestinian resistance has only caused tremendous damage to Palestinians themselves by extracting painful Israeli military reactions and by pushing many Israelis to extremism.

Accordingly, members of this school have expended great effort to limit the resistance so that it does not include Israeli civilians. They have also signaled the possibility of offering the government a year or several months of calm. They advocate pulling the rug out from under Sharon's feet and not giving him cause to do more damage to Palestinian society.

From the beginning, this school of thought saw the Intifada as a serious threat to its platform and negotiating programs. As such, its advocates have worked tirelessly to keep matters under their control and to utilize the Palestinian Intifada only as an instrument for restarting talks. They see the continuation of resistance as a worrisome and dangerous matter. Indeed, inside this school, there are voices saying that even if Sharon intensifies his barbaric attacks, Palestinians must remain idle and win the battle through their blood. These thinkers believe that Palestinians must rescue what is possible to rescue at this stage.

There is an opposing school of thought with different analyses and solutions. This school of thought has sat by and watched the slow nature of the peace process for many years and has come to see the Intifada and its resistance as a process of national liberation, rather than an instrument for restarting the political process. These individuals see the Intifada as expunging the occupation and arriving finally at independence. They see the static regional context as having become a pillar of support for the occupation in Israel's unjust war. They blame the Israeli left for "beautifying" Israeli occupation and accuse it of creating the atmosphere necessary for the collapse of the political process and the entry of Sharon.

This school does not blame the resistance for Sharon's success, despite that he has smashed the rule that Israeli leaders measure success in their ability to provide security for the Israeli people. Rather, it believes that there are other underlying causes for the current environment, most important the absence of the Israeli left over the past two-and-a-half years.

There are two critical strategic dangers for Palestinian society in the foreseeable future. The foremost danger is the threat that Sharon poses to the symbol of Palestinian nationalism, i.e., President Yasser Arafat. Sharon has made no secret of his hatred for the Palestinian leader. Unless the symbol of nationalism is defended and protected by Palestinians themselves, he could be in imminent danger.

The second critical danger is Sharon's determined effort to crush the Intifada, which means more assassinations, incarcerations, starvation, and occupation of the Palestinian people. The strategic danger here lies in the fact that if pushed to its logical conclusions, this might sway some Palestinians to opt for a negotiated process in the absence of the Intifada.

It is my view that whether Sharon forms a national-unity or a rightist government, the next chapter in his political life—likely his last—will not differ dramatically. He is determined to administer the conflict with the Palestinians by relying on his military machine, not on negotiations. Irrespective of coalition partners, Sharon has obtained for his party one-third of the seats in the Israeli Knesset, and it is natural for him to feel victorious and press ahead.

The best protection against this danger is to protect the scope of resistance while arming it with a clear-cut political program that all Israelis are made aware of. They must understand that the Palestinian goal is to end the occupation and that the security of every Israeli is inexorably linked to the security of every Palestinian.

It is impossible to overemphasize the extent of the calamity upon us. Unless it is dealt with creatively, we may find that we have returned to being hostages of Israeli rightist positions—perhaps for decades. The only way to escape is if a balance is maintained between the Intifada and diplomacy. It is said that diplomacy without power is like music without instruments. Palestinian society is well accustomed to internal debate, but the sooner we can arrive at this balance, the better. I believe, eventually, recognition will come—the question is whether it will come too late.

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