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Yossi Alpher is an Israeli strategic analyst. He is former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University.

A PALESTINIAN VIEW

The rise of "Sharonism" through the Aqsa Intifada

by Hisham Ahmed

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Despite predictions that Ariel Sharon would win the Israeli elections, his sweeping victory has resonated loudly in various 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 to 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 death for every three Palestinian dead, while under his predecessor Ehud Barak, the ratio was one to ten, and under Benjamin Netanyahu the ratio was one to fifteen. 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 school suggests that the militarization of the intifada is the central cause for Sharon's landslide return to head the Israeli government. 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 of thought have expended great efforts to limit the resistance so that it does not include Israeli civilians. They have also signaled the possibility of offering the Sharon government a year or several months of calm. These individuals advocate pulling the rug out from 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 posing 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 rescuable at this stage.

There is, of course, 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, therefore, 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 a process of expunging the occupation and arriving finally at independence. They see the static regional context as having actually become a pillar of support for the occupation in Israel's unjust war. This school also blames the Israeli left for "beautifying" Israeli occupation, and accuses 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 of which is the absence of the Israeli left over the last two and a half years.

There are two very 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 Palestinian 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 state of affairs might in the end sway some Palestinians to opt for a negotiated process in the absence of the intifada (i.e., the first school of thought would force through a meaningless political process).

It is my view that, whether Sharon forms a national unity government or an exclusively rightist government, the content of this next chapter in his political life (likely his last) will not differ dramatically. Sharon is determined to administer the conflict with the Palestinians by relying first and foremost on his military machine and not on negotiations. Irrespective of his coalition partners, Sharon has obtained for his party one third of the seats in the Israeli Knesset and it is quite natural, then, 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, leftists and rightists, are made aware of. Every Israeli 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 this situation is dealt with in creative ways, then we may find that we have returned to being the hostages of Israeli rightist positions--not for years to come, but for perhaps 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. Neither should come at the expense of the other. Palestinian society is well accustomed to internal debate, but the sooner we can arrive at this balance, the better. I believe that eventually, that recognition will come--the question is whether it will come too late.-Published 3/2/2003(c)bitterlemons.org

Hisham H. Ahmed, Ph.D, is associate professor of political science at Birzeit University.

AN ISRAELI VIEW

Sharon and the Palestinians: a second chance

by Amnon Abramovitz

Ariel Sharon's victory in the Knesset elections at the head of the Likud list gives him something that belies the familiar cliché: a second chance to leave a first impression. Until now he headed a government based on a Knesset that was elected along with Ehud Barak. Now he's finally alone at the top, his responsibility as unequivocal as the test he faces.

Within the endless tension between reality and aspiration, Sharon emerges at the pragmatic, prudent pole. He may not have abandoned the caprice of holding onto most of the settlements and the territory in the West Bank, but his ardor runs headlong into cooler calculations regarding what