



## Ariel Sharon's unending legacy

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When Ariel Sharon became Israel's prime minister in 2001, much of the world lamented that a fatal blow had been dealt to the Mideast peace process. He was widely denounced in European and Muslim states as a butcher and a war criminal whose goal was ethnic cleansing or possibly mass murder of the Palestinians.

Now that Sharon is incapacitated, many of the same voices are mourning him — irony of ironies — as a peacemaker whose loss would make a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict harder to achieve. The current angst over Sharon's exit from power is likely to prove as misbegotten as the earlier angst over his ascension.

Like other great leaders, "Arik" Sharon altered reality so that the unthinkable became the inevitable. His continuing influence may be likened to that of Franklin Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan. Even after Roosevelt's death, World War II was won, a lib-

eral postwar order was established and the New Deal remained intact. Even after Reagan's retirement, the era of big government was over, the economy stayed strong and the "evil empire" was headed for the ash heap of history.

The legacies of these presidents were ratified not only by their designated heirs (Harry Truman, George H.W. Bush) but, even more important, by presidents of the opposing party (Dwight Eisenhower, Bill Clinton). So too, in all likelihood, will Sharon's successor — whether it is Kadima's Ehud Olmert, Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu or, less likely, Labor's Amir Peretz — carry on his work.

Sharon's primary achievement was to bulldoze the fantasies of left and right. The Israeli left for years had dreamed of reaching an accord to live in peace with the Palestinians. Yasser Arafat's cynical resort to violence in 2000 — even though he was offered

sovereignty over almost the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip – showed that no meaningful negotiations were possible when so many Palestinians had not truly accepted the legitimacy of a Jewish state. The right, for its part, had dreamed of settling Jews in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to make those areas forever part of Greater Israel. But the Palestinians' higher birth rate meant that before long they would become the majority, forcing Israel to jettison either its Jewish identity or its democracy.

With both negotiations and settlements exposed as impossible strategies, Sharon found a successful third way: separation. This involved a spectacular about-face from policies he had advocated throughout his career. Having long championed settlers, he now determined to pull them out of the Gaza Strip. And having opposed building a barrier along the West Bank, he now determined to do just that.

These defensive measures were coupled with a vigorous offense that included armed incursions to clean out terrorist strongholds and targeted killings to eliminate terrorist leaders. Helped by President Bush's unwavering support, his policy paid off with a 90% decline in attacks within Israel.

Perhaps no one other than Sharon could have pulled off this feat – particularly the removal of the settlers – without causing massive upheaval. But Sharon's lifelong history of fighting for the Jewish state reassured

most Israelis that he would not do anything to endanger their security. The taunts of the ultra-right that he was a sellout rang hollow.

Now his work is all but done. The last major step that remains is the removal of the outlying West Bank settlements. This will not happen as quickly or as easily without Sharon's leadership, but it will still happen. That's the logic of the West Bank separation barrier, which closely tracks the cease-fire line (the Green Line) established at the end of Israel's War of Independence in 1949. Less than 10% of the West Bank will remain on the Israeli side of the barrier. The rest will wind up as part of a Palestinian state, even if the next election is won by an opponent of unilateral concessions like Netanyahu. (Recall how Netanyahu opposed the Oslo process as opposition leader but did not abandon it as prime minister from 1996-1999.)

The real challenge for Sharon's successor will be dealing not with the Palestinians but with the Iranians. The European negotiations with Tehran are exposing the futility of pursuing yet another Mideast peace process. Iran is proceeding full speed ahead with plans to build an atomic bomb even as its president vows that "Israel must be wiped off the map." With Jews once again facing the threat of genocide, the next prime minister will have to decide how to stop Iran's nuclear program before it's too late.