



Sharon's Strategy - He does have one

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Clifford D. May

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It turns out that Yasser Arafat, the European left and the Israeli right agree on one thing: All oppose Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from Gaza.

Last weekend, members of Sharon's Likud Party voted against Sharon's plan by a surprisingly wide 60% to 39% margin. One Israeli woman sternly instructed me: "To withdraw from Gaza would be to reward terrorism."

One might expect Sharon to be swayed by that argument. He has been accused of many things but few call him an appeaser. After the 1967 war, he was among those most intent on building buffer zones in

the eastern, northern and western territories from which the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies had, respectively, attacked Israel in what the Arabs intended to be the final solution of the Middle East's Jewish problem.

But Sharon has changed – at least a little. At 76, he is no longer content to await the next terrorist attack and prepare the inevitable Israeli retaliation. He hasn't the patience to mark time until new and more moderate Palestinian leaders arise -- leaders more eager for peace than victory, leaders whose mission is the dignity of freedom, not the slaughter of Jews and the destruction of Israel.

Sharon also knows that politics abhors a vacuum and that if he doesn't have a strategy for ending the long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, yet another set of clever American, European or UN diplomats are sure to come up with bright ideas based on extracting Israeli concessions in exchange for empty Palestinian pledges.

With all this in mind, Sharon has decided to seek not peace but only security, not coexistence but only disengagement. His goal is to divorce Israelis from Palestinians.

That's why he sees leaving Gaza - where 7,500 Israelis live in 21 tightly guarded settlements surrounded by 1.3 million hostile Palestinians - as critical. Sharon also would uproot isolated settlements in the West Bank.

In addition, Sharon is erecting security barriers - fences that prevent suicide bombers living on the West Bank from easily infiltrating Israeli communities. Among those communities: the largest Israeli settlements around Jerusalem which Sharon intends to keep as part of his undiminished desire to give Israel the secure borders promised to it even by the United Nations in the aftermath of the 1967 war (for example, UN Resolution 242).

A fence already separates Gaza from Israel. As a result, terrorists from Gaza rarely manage to penetrate Israel proper. If the new barriers also succeed, it will mean that Israelis will be less vulnerable to attack - in other words, fewer Jews

will be murdered. In Sharon's view, that's not rewarding terrorism, that's frustrating terrorism.

For peace-abiding Palestinians there would be benefits as well. The entire Arab world has been calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. With terrorists locked out of Israel, there would be no need for Israeli tanks, troops and checkpoints in either. Hard as it may be for some European and American leftists to imagine, Israeli troops do not enjoy patrolling Palestinian neighborhoods and Israeli leaders do not delight in ordering them to do so. Israeli occupation is the result of war and terrorism - not its cause.

Why, then, are Arafat and other Arab leaders so vehemently opposed to the Sharon plan? Because it would mean that after all these years, terrorism has failed - and that they have failed as well.

Contrary to what Arafat's amen chorus believes, the goal of Palestinian terrorism was never an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. The terrorists' goal always has been the annihilation of the only nation left in the Middle East that is not dominated by Muslim and Arabs. Read the Hamas charter - it's in there. Read the Palestine Liberation Organization Charter - it's in there, too.

If Sharon's plan were to succeed, Palestinians would have to make hard choices: (1) Find another means to continue the war that has been waged against Israel since its

birth in 1948 and the violence inflicted on Palestinian Jews for over a century, or (2) finally accept the Jewish state and build a real Palestinian state that would live in peace with its neighbor.

Arafat's answer is easy to predict. Nation-building is not a responsibility he has ever wanted to shoulder. Not for him, the founder of Fatah (the word means "conquest"), such mundane tasks as attracting foreign investment, building new housing and filling pot holes in downtown Ramallah.

Last Sunday, a pregnant Jewish mother, on her way to the Likud polls, was murdered with four of her daughters - the youngest just 2 years old. Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees (a

group linked to Arafat) claimed joint responsibility. To Sharon's critics on the right, this attack demonstrates that the terrorists are so bloodthirsty that they won't pause even to allow Israelis to vote on leaving - more reason to stand and fight, to refuse to reward barbarism, lest more barbarism be the outcome.

By contrast, to Sharon and his supporters, the slaughter demonstrated once again the vulnerability of the Gazan settlements and Israel's need for defensible borders, for security from terrorism which could - maybe sooner, maybe later -- lead to real peace not just endless and illusory "peace processes."

To everyone in Israel, and especially to Ariel Sharon, one thing is clear: This debate is far from over.

Clifford D. May, a former New York Times foreign correspondent, is president of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a policy institute focusing on terrorism.

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