



THE SABAN CENTER  
*for* MIDDLE EAST POLICY  
at THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

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Number 2, December 2006

## BACKCHANNEL:

BUSH, SHARON AND  
THE USES OF UNILATERALISM

NAHUM BARNEA  
ARIEL KASTNER

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THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., NW  
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## THE AUTHORS

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**NAHUM BARNEA** is the leading Political Columnist with *Yediot Ahronot*, Israel's largest circulation daily newspaper. Before joining *Yediot*, he was Editor-in-Chief of the weekly *Koteret Rashit*. From 1973-82, Barnea worked at the *Davar* daily newspaper, where he served as a Reporter, Columnist, and Washington Bureau Chief. Before beginning his career in journalism, he served as Deputy Spokesman for the Israeli Ministry of Communications. Barnea is a recipient of the Sokolov Prize for journalism. He was the 2006 Kreiz Visiting Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

**ARIEL KASTNER** is a Senior Research Assistant at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, where he focuses on Israeli and Palestinian affairs. He has published opinion pieces in *The Baltimore Sun* and *New York Newsday*, and has commented on the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war for American radio and the European press. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Rochester and an M.P.P. in International Security from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.



## INTRODUCTION: GEORGE BALL AND THE SHAPING OF UNILATERALISM

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In April 1977, *Foreign Affairs* published a piece by George W. Ball, entitled “How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself.” Ball, who had served as Undersecretary of State for Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson, argued that Israel should withdraw to its pre-June 1967 boundaries in return for peace with the Palestinians. What was provocative about Ball’s piece was the manner in which he framed his argument: it was in Israel’s vital interest for the United States to impose upon it, and the Arabs, a solution to their conflict. Ball argued that:

Israel must be made to understand that a continuance of the present stalemate is more dangerous than the concessions required for peace...America’s indispensable role is to provide the means of relieving the political leaders on both sides of the need to make politically unpalatable decisions, by furnish-

ing them the escape route of yielding reluctantly under the relentless pressure of outside forces. This means that our President must take the political heat from powerful and articulate pro-Israeli domestic groups.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next several months, however, events in the region made Ball’s arguments temporarily irrelevant. In May 1977, Menachem Begin was elected prime minister of Israel and soon after Egypt and Israel began talks behind the United States’ back, which ultimately led to the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty. Within this context, Begin undertook two policies that reframed the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict: he returned the whole Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but at the same time, committed Israel to a large-scale settlement building program in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Ball, “How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 55, No. 3, April 1977, p. 459.

Begin's approach would come to dominate the dynamics between Israel and its Arab neighbors over the next quarter of a century. Arab states and the Palestinians would consistently seek full Israeli withdrawals from the land that Israel had taken during the Six Day War of June 1967. For example, just as Egypt had demanded the return of the whole Sinai, the Syrians focused on Israel's "full withdrawal" from the Golan Heights throughout the history of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.<sup>2</sup> However, Israel would use the time gained from yielding or offering full withdrawal to neighboring Arab states to strengthen its grip on territories within *Eretz Yisrael* (the "Land of Israel," aka "Greater Israel"). Land conquered in the 1967 war was the currency, and peace was the proclaimed objective; but beneath it lay the hope of successive right-wing Israeli prime ministers that by giving up land, Israel would gain the time essential for colonizing the West Bank to the point where it would be impossible to evacuate.

The key Israeli official who implemented this settlements policy under Begin was the then Minister of Agriculture, Ariel Sharon.<sup>3</sup> Almost thirty years later, in 2005, the same man would engage in a similarly defining moment in Israeli policy when he unilaterally disengaged Israel from the Gaza Strip as a means of strengthening Israel's hold on most of the West Bank. Just as Begin had

traded the Sinai for an implicitly free hand in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, so Sharon hoped that by giving up Gaza, Israel would strengthen its position in the West Bank.

Ball's proposal for an imposed solution never became U.S. policy, but the idea of an imposed solution remained a fear that would stay in the back of the minds of some Israeli leaders. Foremost amongst those who feared a U.S.-imposed settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict was Sharon. His concern—that Israel would be corralled into a negotiating process that would force it to sacrifice its security interests on the altar of a broader U.S. agenda in the Middle East—would greatly affect the manner in which he dealt with the United States.

When he finally achieved an election victory over Ehud Barak in February 2001, one key action Sharon took to prevent his worry from becoming reality was to establish a strong mechanism of communication between senior-level officials in both the U.S. and Israeli governments, a backchannel of a kind never used before between the two countries.

While the initial purpose of this backchannel was to prevent U.S. pressure on Israel, as it turned out, Sharon found that mechanism useful to secure important, but short-term political victories against the Palestinians. Sharon gained U.S. concessions on the

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), pp. 146, 553.

<sup>3</sup> At the time, Sharon said "he expected there to be 2,000,000 Israelis in the West Bank at the turn of the century. When I asked him how that was demographically possible, he replied that by the year 2000 the total Israeli population would rise to 4,200,000"—George W. Ball, "The Coming Crisis in Israeli-American Relations," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1979/80, Vol. 58, No. 2, p. 244. Sharon's predictions were off. In 2000, while the total Jewish population of Israel was 5.2 million, only 191,500 Jews lived in the West Bank. See Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, No. 51, (Jerusalem, 2001), available at <[http://www.cbs.gov.il/archive/shnaton52/st02\\_07.pdf](http://www.cbs.gov.il/archive/shnaton52/st02_07.pdf)>.

need for Palestinians to halt violence before the resumption of negotiations and on a number of key permanent-status issues. While these victories may have seemed to be major advances, they would likely not have held during any proper peace talks with the Palestinians. No serious Palestinian partner could have come to the table to negotiate with Israel and accept that permanent-status issues had already been resolved between the United States and Israel. And no U.S. President serious about Israeli-Palestinian peace would allow such peace talks to be prejudged. For Sharon, this was not the point. The mechanism he established, and the resulting relationship between U.S. and Israeli officials was an insurance policy against possible American pressure for an imposed solution.

Sharon went one step further. To avoid American pressure, he initiated a policy of unilateralism, which meant withdrawing Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip (the Gaza Disengagement), and from the northern West Bank in the absence of negotiations with an Arab partner. This too had an initial appeal. By withdrawing Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip, Sharon hoped to relieve Israel of the security burden and responsibility for governing 1.4 million Palestinians while giving the impression of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The gains from the Gaza Disengagement, however, proved to be short-lived. While Israel benefited in some manner from removing settlers from the midst of a hostile Palestinian population, such measures did not achieve lasting security. The unilateral nature of the Gaza pullout ended

up weakening, rather than strengthening Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, and played a role in the victory of the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections on January 25, 2006. As events in the summer of 2006 would prove, Israeli unilateralism, whether in Gaza or in Lebanon (six years earlier), failed to bring about the stability that many thought it would.

Sharon's personal and political success was a missed opportunity for Israel. For short-term, tactical gains against the Palestinians, Sharon forsook the opportunity to engage with the United States in a strategic dialogue that would have dealt with grander threats to Israeli security, such as the Iranian nuclear program. The reason for this failure was ultimately intellectual. Sharon believed that Israel's path to peace involved confronting a binary choice: either accepting an outside imposed solution, or implementing Israeli unilateralism. However, history has proven that the Middle East is a multilateral game, with no easy way out for any of the players. Sharon's primary concept, that Israel would reach peace either through its own volition or an American imposition, is too simplistic for the complex Israeli-Arab dispute, a problem that demands a more nuanced approach. In one sense, however, Sharon must have thought himself fortunate, he found in George W. Bush a president who famously declared that "In Texas, we don't do nuance." Bush, too, would promote his own form of unilateralism in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, that would ironically reinforce Sharon's approach.



## BUSH AND SHARON: THE UNLIKELY CONNECTION

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In the fall of 2000, as the U.S. presidential election campaign neared its conclusion, most Israelis, including members of the political establishment, believed that Vice President Al Gore would become the next president of the United States. Gore was a familiar figure, and many expected that in his presidency he would continue the policy of outgoing President William J. Clinton towards settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. By contrast, Gore's opponent, George W. Bush, the Governor of Texas, was a political non-entity for most Israelis. Aside from a visit that Bush had made to Israel in 1998, during which he took a helicopter tour over the West Bank with Sharon, the Israeli establishment had had little contact with him. Once the election result was declared, Bush's victory was met within the Israeli political establishment, and by Sharon himself, with suspicion. This was largely a fear of the unknown, but also a concern about what ideas Bush might have inherited from his father, President George H.W. Bush.

Sharon, for one, initially believed that George W. Bush would follow his father's policies, which he considered unfriendly. The Israeli prime minister also believed that the new U.S. president would surround himself with his father's former advisors, including James Baker, his father's Secretary of State, and Brent Scowcroft, his father's National Security Advisor, neither of whom was seen as pro-Israel.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Sharon regarded Condoleezza Rice, the incoming National Security Advisor, as potentially hostile because she was a Scowcroft protégée. Indeed, Sharon remembered an experience he had with the first Bush Administration when he had traveled to Washington in 1991. At the time, Sharon was Israel's Minister of Housing in the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and was scheduled to meet with his American counterpart, the pro-Israel Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Jack Kemp. However, Baker and Scowcroft opposed the Sharon-Kemp meeting because of Sharon's role in expanding settlement

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the differences in the approaches to Israel between President George H. W. Bush and President George W. Bush, see Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Bush's Embrace of Israel Shows Gap with Father," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2006, p. A6, available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/02/washington/02prexy.html?ex=1312171200&en=216bbe96d37bcf9b&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>>.



construction in the West Bank. According to State Department spokeswoman Margaret D. Tutwiler, Baker had “sent a heads-up message back to the White House suggesting that for a Cabinet officer of this Administration to receive Minister Sharon, who was publicly opposing the President’s policies regarding a Middle East peace, would not be the appropriate thing to do.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, Sharon and Kemp were forced to meet at the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC rather than on U.S. government property.

Sharon also picked up on sentiment within the Arab world that was optimistic about the incoming Bush presidency. According to *The Washington Post*, “2001 began hopefully for the Saudis. The new U.S. president was the son of the most popular American in Saudi Arabia, George H.W. Bush, a national hero for his role in protecting the kingdom from Iraq’s Saddam Hussein in 1990-91. Saudis, who know about dynasties, had high expectations for the son.”<sup>6</sup>

The deck seemed stacked against a strong Bush-Sharon connection when both entered office in early 2001. It therefore came as something of a surprise to Sharon during his first meeting at the White House in March 2001 when the new president said he would use force to protect Israel.<sup>7</sup> The president’s

father would have never made such a statement.

So what accounts for the relationship that developed between Sharon and Bush? Some have argued that Bush’s evangelical Christian convictions and the strong evangelical base within the Republican Party are the basis for his support for Israel, but others argue this is not the case. Dr. Richard Land, a leading voice in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical organization in the United States, and a strong supporter and associate of George W. Bush disagreed with the notion that Bush’s faith has played a role in his relationship with Israel. Asked if Bush’s support for Israel was based on his religious beliefs, Dr. Land said:

I don’t think that Bush is that kind of evangelical. I know the man since 1988. I think his support for Israel is the classic American support: number one, it’s the only stable democracy in the Middle East. Number two, Israel has the right to exist within secure borders. Number three, Israel has a moral claim on the world because of the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the president’s beliefs, Sharon, a secular Jew, never approached the president from the angle of religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Tolchin, “Kemp Sees Israel’s Housing Chief At Embassy After Baker Objection,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1991, p. A14.

<sup>6</sup> Robert G. Kaiser and David B. Ottaway, “Saudi Leader’s Anger Revealed Shaky Ties; Bush’s Response Eased a Deep Rift On Mideast Policy; Then Came Sept. 11,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2002, p. A01.

<sup>7</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Nahum Barnea interview with Dr. Richard Land, May 31, 2006, Nashville, TN. Despite repeated claims that Bush is driven by his religious beliefs, the Bush Administration has responded with blunt denials. When White House Press Secretary Tony Snow was asked about the role of religion in influencing the president’s policies during the 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah, he said, “He’s not looking at this through a theological lens. He’s looking at it through the lens of national interest, and also commitments to expanding democracy globally. And so that’s his view.” Office of the Press Secretary, White House Press Briefing by Tony Snow, July 27, 2006 available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060727-8.html>>.

Rather, the basis for the strong connection between Bush and the State of Israel rested upon the partnership Prime Minister Sharon established with the U.S. president. It would soon become apparent that there were several fundamental similarities in the way in which the two led their administrations, despite their differences in background and personality. Both placed a premium on working within a tight, centralized, and loyal environment where personal trust was valued above all other qualities. In addition, both Bush and Sharon defined leadership in highly personal terms, believing that a leader alone must take the initiative in effecting change. As a result, both looked to make a dramatic difference rather than to protect the *status quo*.

On the diplomatic front, the two men had distaste for the subtle back-and-forth of negotiation, in effect shunning diplomacy. Bush saw matters as black or white, and had little patience for diplomatic subtleties.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Bush favored action. One Bush Administration official put it succinctly when he said that the president had been interested in making policies, not diplomacy. Bush himself confirmed this, when he said in a 2003 interview that “the Bush doctrine is

actually being defined by action, as opposed to by words.”<sup>10</sup>

Bush and Sharon’s common desire to be active leaders, independent from the constraints of world opinion, produced the basis for a shared foreign policy vision: unilateralism. Throughout most of his career, Sharon had been consistent in viewing any agreement with Arab leaders with distrust, and believing that Israel had to solve its fundamental security problems through unilateral measures.<sup>11</sup> The 1982 Lebanon war, during which Sharon had sought to install a friendly Lebanese government that would sign a lasting peace treaty with Israel, and his championing of an expansion of settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza, were testament to Sharon’s predisposition to unilateralism. It was thus in the same vein that Sharon proposed a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the Gaza Disengagement, in late 2003, about nine months after what many saw as the unilateral American war in Iraq. Sharon’s policy of unilateralism, of initiating steps towards security, heedless of what other felt, aligned with President Bush’s view of preemptive war as a key element of U.S. national security strategy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> He had once informed CNN’s Candy Crowley that “in Texas, we don’t do nuance.” *CNN Live Today*, April 25, 2001, transcript accessed through Lexis-Nexis.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Brokaw interview with President George W. Bush, April 24, 2003 accessed through “NBC Nightly News Interview with President Bush,” Lexis-Nexis, April 25, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> As foreign minister, Sharon negotiated the Wye Plantation accords of October 1998 on behalf of the Netanyahu government. Despite his participation in negotiating the accords with the Palestinians, he never trusted agreements between Israel and the Palestinians.

<sup>12</sup> On September 20, 2002, the White House issued “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” that redefined the country’s national security policy. According to *The Washington Post*, “Deterrence and containment, the previous foundations of U.S. strategy, are no longer valid, Bush said in a 31-page document titled ‘The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.’ Instead, the United States must identify and destroy the terrorist threat ‘before it reaches our borders,’ if necessary acting alone and using preemptive force.” Karen DeYoung and Mike Allen, “Bush Shifts Strategy From Deterrence to Dominance,” *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2002, p. A01, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A43744-2002Sep20&notFound=true>>. See also National Security Council, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002 available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>>.

Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both leaders held in contempt the negotiations paradigm championed by President Clinton and Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak. In particular, Bush and Sharon were critical of the Oslo process that began in 1993, and the subsequent failed Camp David negotiations of the summer of 2000. For Sharon, this approach represented the very path he aimed to avoid because the “process” meant Israel losing control over the most important issue, its security, by becoming enmeshed in negotiations in which it could be subjected to American pressure. Similarly, Bush had no desire to be burned politically by the peace process as Clinton had been.

The relationship between Sharon and Bush, therefore, seems to have been based on the intersection of governing styles and visions, rather than on personal friendship. Once established, the relationship was strengthened by a mechanism of communication between both governments, a unique backchannel.

### THE ISRAELI MECHANISM

Shortly after Sharon became prime minister, in April 2001, the Israeli Air Force retaliated against ongoing Hizballah attacks across the Lebanese-Israeli border by bombing a Syrian radar station located in the Dahr el-Baidar region of Lebanon. The Israeli operation was the first against Syrian targets in Lebanon since Israel had withdrawn its troops from

its northern neighbor’s territory in May 2000.<sup>13</sup> It was also the first instance of crisis communications between the Sharon and Bush administrations. From Sharon’s perspective, the channel to the White House did not function well.

Sharon asked his foreign policy advisor, Daniel Ayalon, to brief Rice, Bush’s new National Security Advisor, as to why Israel felt it had to take military action in Lebanon. When Ayalon called Washington to deliver the Israeli message, his call was intercepted by Shimon Peres, then Minister of Foreign Affairs in the national unity government that Sharon led after his February 2001 election victory.<sup>14</sup> Peres insisted on personally delivering the news and the explanations to Rice. This episode disturbed Sharon. The Israeli prime minister, who valued a direct line of communication, resolved to put in place measures that would prevent any such recurrence.

Sharon installed a communications mechanism with the White House that would prove to be unique. What was different about the Bush-Sharon backchannel was not its structure, but its intensity. As Sharon valued secrecy, and did not trust the standard channels of communication, he appointed an emissary who would bypass not only Shimon Peres’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC, and the American Jewish leaders who had mediated between past Israeli governments and U.S. administrations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Sam F. Ghattas, “Israel launches airstrikes against Syrian army in Lebanon,” *Associated Press*, April 16, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Peres served as Sharon’s minister of foreign affairs from March 7, 2001 to November 2, 2002. In all, Sharon had three ministers of foreign affairs, Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu and Silvan Shalom.

<sup>15</sup> According to a former Sharon advisor, Sharon also reduced the number of meetings with Members of Congress in an attempt to strengthen his relationship with the White House.

Sharon's first emissary was Arieh Genger, an Israeli-born New York businessman who had been a close Sharon confidant for 35 years. Although there had been backchannels before, for example Max Fisher and Armand Hammer, who had been used by several Israeli prime ministers during the 1960s and 1970s to communicate with Republican presidents, none had as broad a mandate as Genger's, nor had any enjoyed the level of access to the Israeli prime minister that Genger had with Sharon.

Genger's first mission was to the State Department, because Sharon at first believed that the backchannel should be to Foggy Bottom rather than to the White House. Initially, senior State Department officials did not know how to treat Genger when he approached them because he was a U.S. citizen and had no official Israeli government position. One State Department official telephoned Dennis Ross, the former U.S. special Middle East coordinator under Clinton, to inquire into Genger's credentials. Ross assuaged their concerns by telling them how effective Genger had been as a backchannel when Sharon was Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs in the late 1990s during the premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>16</sup> Sharon had used Genger to bypass Netanyahu in his dealings with the Clinton Administration. Despite this initial American wariness of Genger, his personal closeness to Sharon meant that he could play a role that no previous backchannel had been able to fulfill.

Genger, however, had one major weakness: since he was American, he was not and could not become a member of Prime Minister

Sharon's staff. As a result, his role raised eyebrows in Israel and attracted the hostile attention of Israeli Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein, who considered himself to be more qualified for the position. Rubinstein not only resisted cooperating with Genger, but pressed Sharon to limit his use of Genger as an emissary. Eventually, Sharon, who was dependent on the attorney general's good will on matters relating to ongoing investigations of his finances, succumbed and replaced Genger in the spring of 2002.

Sharon's appointment of Genger was a manifestation of his desire to consolidate channels of communications with the United States and to avoid misunderstandings. More than any Israeli prime minister before him, Sharon was reluctant to have any public disagreements with the United States. He had learned from the lessons of his Likud predecessors, Shamir and Netanyahu. These Likud prime ministers had tried to thwart what they saw as the unfavorable policies of the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations by mobilizing pro-Israel members of the U.S. Congress—a maneuver that had failed. Sharon also knew that Israeli voters tend to punish Israeli leaders, particularly those from the Likud Party, who have open confrontations with the United States, because Israelis feel that American good will is their country's main strategic asset. Drawing from his own experiences, Sharon could remember his time as defense minister during the 1982 Lebanon War when he had endless, and politically costly, confrontations with the U.S. Special Envoy, Philip C. Habib, over the Israeli invasion.

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<sup>16</sup> Sharon had held the post from October 13, 1998 to July 6, 1999.

Sharon therefore went to great lengths to ensure that there was no conflict, or perception of conflict, between him and George W. Bush. Instead, he wanted to conquer the hearts of the president and of his closest aides. For Sharon, this was as much a personal quest as a political one.

### THE AMERICAN MECHANISM

While the establishment of a backchannel communications mechanism was of great importance to Sharon, it was not as high a priority for the Bush Administration. Israeli principals have historically devoted considerable energy to ensuring close ties with U.S. presidents, yet the relationship can never be of equal weight to both parties. Israel is one of many small-sized countries with which the president must deal. The difficulty is that many in Israel have been spoiled by U.S. presidential attention over the years, thanks to the frequent visits of Israeli prime ministers to Washington DC.

Initially, President Bush seemed to demonstrate the imbalance in the United States-Israel relationship. In the early months of his first term, Bush shied away from foreign affairs, allowing Vice President Richard Cheney to take the lead. While Bush focused on his domestic agenda, Cheney oversaw such matters as policy towards Israel. Cheney had forged a close relationship with Israel's defense establishment in the early 1990's when, as George H.W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, he worked closely with Moshe Arens, Israel's minister of defense, during the first Gulf War.

In early 2001, Cheney instructed his Chief of Staff Lewis Libby to take a lead role in United States-Israel relations.

Although the shift of the Israeli "account" to the Office of the Vice President would prove temporary, it acted to solidify the strong connection between the United States and Israel that the Bush-Sharon special channel would further enhance. The importance of Cheney's office stemmed from the fact that some of his key staffers had in the past worked closely with Israel. Cheney's advisor on the Middle East, John Hannah, had been the Deputy Director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a pro-Israel Washington think tank that has built connections with leaders in the Middle East, in particular Israeli policymakers.

There was also another aspect at play. Shifting responsibility for relations with Israel to the vice president's office had the effect of moving the alliance between the United States and Israel closer to the Pentagon's orbit, a department of government with which Cheney was closely aligned. As a result, it became easier for key Pentagon officials who supported Israel, such as Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense and Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense, to influence U.S. policy towards Israel.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, because Cheney's office had control over the Israeli "account," Secretary of State Colin Powell and the State Department, natural proponents of Israeli-Arab negotiations and the peace process, with whom the vice president had an adversarial relationship, were marginalized.

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<sup>17</sup> The two men had very different attitudes to Israel. Wolfowitz was sympathetic to the Geneva Initiative of 2003 and was dovish on the peace process. Feith had advised Netanyahu and was seen as more hawkish.

## THE ISRAELI MECHANISM EVOLVES

In the Spring of 2002, Sharon's office underwent dramatic changes with two major figures leaving: Genger, his special emissary, and Uri Shani, the Chief of the Prime Minister's Bureau.<sup>18</sup> Shani's replacement was Dov Weissglas, who had been Sharon's private attorney and had famously represented him in his libel suit against *Time Magazine* in the 1980s.

As Chief of the Prime Minister's Bureau, Weissglas proved more interested in Israel's relationship with the United States than in his day-to-day managerial responsibilities. Weissglas quickly filled the vacuum created by Genger's departure, devoting a majority of his time to the American "account." Like Genger, Weissglas had Sharon's ear and acted as an extension of the prime minister's authority. Weissglas, however, had an important advantage: he was a member of Sharon's staff, a full-fledged Israeli official with the necessary standing and institutional clout to carry messages and, if necessary, implement policies. In a sense, Weissglas combined the influence of Genger and Shani: like Shani, he could dictate decisions to the Israeli executive branch, and like Genger he had access and respect at the White House. As Weissglas himself put it, Sharon looked upon him as personal property, which meant that the prime minister did not feel that his authority or image were undermined or threatened when Weissglas later became the darling of the Bush Administration. Sharon's personal "ownership" of Weissglas and strong support for him meant that key personnel within the

Bush Administration wanted to deal with the new backchannel emissary.

Sharon's backing of Weissglas was made clear some time later when Silvan Shalom, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs from February 2003 to January 2006, sought to cultivate his own line of communication with Powell and Rice. Sharon summoned Shalom and drew the line. "You have the whole world under your watch," Sharon said, "except two places: the White House and parts of the State Department. These two belong to Weissglas." Weissglas made it his priority to streamline the contact and make it more efficient by funneling all issues through him and his small staff, delivering responses directly back to the White House rather than to the subordinate branches of the U.S. government.

Before Weissglas developed his backchannel with the Americans, the U.S.-Israeli government-to-government relationship had been spread across multiple agencies and departments on both sides. Weissglas therefore managed to resolve problems in hours that in the past had taken weeks, or even months. He was able to squeeze positive answers from his fellow Israelis by brandishing Sharon's directive that Israel should accommodate the United States on all requests, so long as these were minor matters or close to Bush's heart.

Thanks to the strong connections that Weissglas built with the United States, he was able to discover problems that would otherwise have remained hidden. For example, it

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<sup>18</sup> The position of Chief of the Israeli Prime Minister's Bureau is akin to that of the Chief of Staff in the White House.

transpired that although there was a considerable amount of intelligence-sharing between Israel and the United States, mainly through the CIA station in Tel Aviv, little data actually reached the White House. To overcome this bureaucratic logjam, Weissglas installed an officer of Israeli military intelligence within the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>19</sup> The officer delivered all relevant intelligence information, especially relating to terrorism, to Weissglas who would then deliver it to Stephen Hadley, Bush's first-term Deputy National Security Advisor and to Elliott Abrams, the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Near East and North African Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC).<sup>20</sup>

There was, however, a serious weakness in this backchannel structure. Communication was structured in a linear fashion, which meant that neither side was capable of dealing efficiently with problems that fell out of its remit. One example of this shortcoming was the "Chinese Affair" that occurred in 2004 and threatened a profound disruption of the vital military relationship between the United States and Israel. The "Chinese Affair" was the worst crisis to hit United States-

Israel relations since the 1985 Jonathan Pollard affair, when Israel had recruited a U.S. intelligence analyst to steal intelligence on its behalf. Moreover, it had echoes of the 1992 Patriot Missile inquiry, during which Israel was suspected, but eventually cleared of, transferring sensitive defense technology to China.<sup>21</sup>

In mid-2004, the United States discovered that Israel had sold military equipment to China a few years earlier without proper U.S. authorization. Given the growing U.S. concern at China's advancing strength, and the extent of U.S. military assistance to Israel, the American side reacted furiously. The Pentagon decided to cut cooperation on a joint-weapons project and end all contact with Amos Yaron, the Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense.<sup>22</sup> Neither President Bush and his staff, nor Prime Minister Sharon and his staff wanted to involve themselves in this issue, and because of this neglect, the "Chinese Affair" started to have a noticeable impact on bilateral relations. In late 2004, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Feith demanded that Yaron be fired.<sup>23</sup> Sharon refused to intervene: Yaron was an old

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<sup>19</sup> In Israel, military intelligence has the lead role on assessments.

<sup>20</sup> Abrams joined the Bush Administration in June 2001 as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations.

<sup>21</sup> In March 1992, the administration of George H. W. Bush ordered an investigation into Israel's possible sale of Patriot Missile technology to China. Israel denied the sale and the following month, the State Department issued a statement that cleared Israel of the charge. According to *The New York Times*, the crisis threatened United States-Israel relations: "The Patriot issue and the related investigation inflamed an already emotional debate on the issues that dominate the two nations' agendas: the Arab-Israeli peace talks, the settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza and a request for \$10 billion in United States loan guarantees to help new immigrants to Israel. Administration officials said today that their careful statements were designed to deflate these tensions." Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. Said to Suspect Israelis Gave China American Arms," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1992, p. A12; Patrick E. Tyler, "No Evidence Found of Patriot Sales by Israel to China," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1992, p. A1.

<sup>22</sup> Scott Wilson, "Israel Set to End China Arms Deal Under U.S. Pressure; Settlers, Soldiers Clash in Gaza Town," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2005, p. A12, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/26/AR2005062600544.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> Aluf Benn and Amnon Barzilai, "Pentagon official wants Yaron fired," *Ha'aretz*, December 16, 2004.

pal from the army. Similarly, Bush's advisors chose to distance themselves from the affair: they regarded the matter as the Department of Defense's problem. In the end, the "Chinese Affair" was allowed to rumble on until Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Shalom publicly apologized in June 2005 and Israel allowed the United States some oversight over future arms deals.<sup>24</sup> Yaron was indeed replaced, but not before the Pentagon applied sanctions to Israel. The incident, a public feud between the Israeli and American governments, was the very type of thing Sharon had hoped the communication mechanism would prevent, but to which the mechanism's relentless focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue was blind.

The centralized system also caused tension on the Israeli side. Diplomats at the Israeli embassy in Washington were bypassed daily and, as one of the diplomats at the time said, even when he had the rare opportunity to re-

ceive a call from Jerusalem with a request to contact the White House, Weissglas had already telephoned and taken care of the matter. Those left out of the loop felt insulted, especially Shalom, who eventually retaliated by withdrawing support for Sharon within the Likud Party.<sup>25</sup>

The communication mechanism that Weissglas established was effective because of four key components: mutual trust, secrecy, efficiency, and credibility. Yet it had its failings. Israel focused on securing the support of top U.S. officials, neglecting to secure support within other components of the U.S. government. While the method was efficient, and played into the governing styles of Bush and Sharon, it failed to recognize that other factors, such as competition and suspicion within other branches of the government have to be mitigated to ensure the durability of the United States-Israel relationship.

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<sup>24</sup> Scott Wilson, *op.cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Most notably, in March 2005, Shalom, along with Benjamin Netanyahu, pushed the Likud Party to propose in the Knesset a bill to require that a national referendum approve Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. Greg Myre, "Sharon and His Party Trade Gibes Over His Plan to Leave Gaza," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2005, p. A7.





## THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

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Sharon arrived for his first prime ministerial visit to Washington DC in March 2001, only a month into his term and in the midst of the worst wave of terrorism that Israel had ever faced. Sharon had two objectives for his meeting with President Bush: to counter pressure to negotiate with the Palestinians while attacks continued and to marginalize PA President Yassir Arafat. While he was pleasantly surprised when Bush told him that the United States would protect Israel by force if needed, Sharon still had to overcome the institutional view in Washington DC: that Israel should negotiate with the Palestinians despite violence and that Arafat was a partner with whom the Israelis, and the world, should talk.

Sharon needed Bush's support to fend off international pressure, particularly from European Union countries and many at the United Nations, to negotiate with the Palestinians despite the prevailing violence. The problem for Sharon was that he believed that the basic logic of the EU position—that negotiations were a means to stop the violence—was

flawed. Instead, he maintained that the terrorist attacks had to cease before Israel could conduct negotiations. Throughout his tenure, Sharon had an abiding worry that Israel would be forced to talk under fire. In a sense, demanding that Israel speak to the Palestinians despite Palestinian violence was another manifestation of the Ball mentality of an imposed solution, precisely the approach that Sharon viscerally rejected. Sharon's aversion to negotiating under fire was fortified as his tenure progressed and was transformed into a position that rejected negotiations under any circumstances and which sought to resolve Israel's security and border issues unilaterally.

Sharon's second objective, to de-legitimize Arafat in the eyes of the Bush Administration, was not an easy task. Arafat was a democratically elected leader welcomed by most governments in the world and enjoyed constant meetings with senior level U.S. officials. Indeed, the CIA Director, George Tenet, and former Senator George Mitchell met with Arafat in 2001 while constructing their policy

recommendations, clear evidence that the Bush Administration then regarded Arafat as an acceptable interlocutor, not as an enemy to be shunned.<sup>26</sup>

Sharon had also put himself in a difficult position on the Arafat issue by attempting initially to cultivate a relationship with the Palestinian leader. In mid-July 2001, just months after his first meeting with Bush, Sharon sent his son Omri to speak face-to-face with Arafat himself and to meet with Muhammad Rashid, Arafat's confidant.<sup>27</sup> How could Sharon convince Bush to refrain from communicating with Arafat when he was attempting to do so himself? Although Sharon was not looking at Arafat as a partner with whom to negotiate permanent-status issues, but rather as an interlocutor with whom to discuss minimizing the violence, his indirect contacts with Arafat made his case more difficult to sell.

While these roadblocks were in Sharon's way, none was, arguably, as difficult to overcome as the fact that President Bush, at that time, did not want to make any bold gestures regarding U.S. policy towards the Middle East. To be sure, Bush had no desire to follow Clinton down what he saw as the politically costly path of negotiations and the peace process, but he also did not want to imple-

ment a shift in the U.S. position by isolating Arafat. So while Bush allowed Powell, Tenet and Mitchell to engage heavily in efforts to broker an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire, he deliberately remained uninvolved.<sup>28</sup>

Privately, however, Bush demonstrated sympathy towards the Israeli position. A senior leader within the American Jewish community, who was a frequent visitor to the White House in 2001, believes that on an emotional level Bush understood the terrorist threat that Israel faced, but the president had little interest in the details of the conflict. One of Sharon's closest advisors who was in contact with the Bush Administration at the time summed up the initial relationship between the U.S. president and the Israeli prime minister: Bush would just make statements indicating that Israel should show restraint and the Palestinians should stop terrorism. Moreover, Bush was indifferent and willing to give Sharon a free hand, as long as Sharon's military actions against the Palestinians did not create a problem for Bush in the war against terrorism.

Despite these initial difficulties, Sharon did manage to achieve his first goal by convincing Bush that Israel should not negotiate under fire. So while the Bush Administration still regarded Arafat as a potential partner

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<sup>26</sup> Tenet's plan was a measure to reach an immediate ceasefire. Mitchell's plan was long-term measure that included steps both sides should take to get back on a peace track. For more details see Ken Guggenheim, "Three Plans For Peace: A Look At The Tenet, Mitchell And Saudi Mideast Peace Plans," *Associated Press*, April 3, 2002, available at <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/04/03/world/main505244.shtml>>.

<sup>27</sup> *Agence France-Presse*, "Sharon son has talks with Arafat: report," July 13, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Arguably, Bush's lack of interest was evidenced by the manner in which he doggedly stuck to the talking points given to him by the National Security Council and the State Department. Bush was so keen to repeat these messages that during Sharon's second visit to the White House in June 2001, the president said eleven times that "progress" was being made between Israelis and Palestinians, even though facts on the ground proved otherwise. Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President and Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon in Photo Opportunity," June 26, 2001, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

for peace, Bush did not press Israel to engage in talks while violence persisted. On August 24, 2001, Bush held a press conference at his ranch in Crawford, Texas at which he, in essence, articulated Sharon's position:

In order for there to be any peace talks in the Middle East, the first thing that must happen is that both parties must resolve to stop violence. The Israelis have made it very clear that they will not negotiate under terrorist threat. And if Mr. Arafat is interested in having a dialogue that could conceivably lead to the Mitchell process, then I strongly urge him to urge the terrorists, the Palestinian terrorists, to stop the suicide bombings, to stop the incursions, to stop the threats.

At the same time, we have worked very closely with Prime Minister Sharon to urge him to show restraint. Terrorism is prevalent now in the Middle East, and the first thing that all parties who are concerned about peace in the Middle East must do is work to stop the terrorist activities.

The Israelis will not negotiate under terrorist threat, simple as that. And if the Palestinians are interested in a dialogue, then I strongly urge Mr. Arafat to put 100 percent effort into solving the terrorist activity, into stopping the terrorist activity. And I believe he can do a better job of doing that.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President and Secretary Rumsfeld in Announcement of Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," August 24, 2001, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/08/20010824.html>>.



## AFTER 9/11: AN EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP AND REVOLUTIONARY POLICIES

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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) changed the way in which Bush viewed Israel. Bush began to see Israel not just as a friend in trouble, but as a valuable ally in the war against terrorism. Sharon, however, miscalculated the Bush Administration's reaction to 9/11. Despite this initial error, indeed to an extent because of it, Sharon ended up making some important advances.

The terrorist attacks shifted Bush's agenda towards the war against terrorism into which Israel had a natural place as a strategic ally that could contribute intelligence, understanding, and experience. Moreover, Bush's perception of the world worked in Israel's favor. According to Bush, countries were either "with us or against us" in the war against terrorism, and they were either dictatorships (which according to Bush bred terrorism) or democracies (which Bush believed were the political antidote to terrorism). Israel not only passed both of these tests but was also both staunchly pro-American and a victim of terrorism. After Britain, there was no oth-

er country in the world that was more closely aligned with Bush's post-9/11 mindset than Israel.

Sharon did not understand Bush's change in attitude after 9/11, instead believing the terrorist attacks would threaten the United States-Israel relationship. He expected that the international community would react to Bush's strong actions against the terrorists, which was affecting the West's relations with Arab and Muslim communities, by seeking to assuage Arab and Muslim concerns on other fronts, most obviously the Palestinian issue. Sharon was also acutely aware of the widespread view that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the root cause of terrorism emanating from Arab countries. For these reasons, he feared a "domino theory" of transmitted international diplomatic pressure: the Arab world, feeling under pressure and increased scrutiny from the United States, would pressure the European Union countries, which would in turn pressure the United States to secure Israeli concessions towards the Palestinians.

To preempt any such U.S. attempt to lean on Israel, Sharon took two apparently contradictory positions that actually complemented each other. First, in a speech to a teachers' convention at Latrun on September 23, 2001, Sharon spoke for the first time about the possibility of a Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel. From a man long regarded as a hardliner on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this was a remarkable statement.

Second, in a press conference on October 4, 2001, Sharon made controversial remarks that evoked the shadow of the Munich Agreement of 1938 during which Britain and France had betrayed Czechoslovakia to Hitler. Sharon said:

We have only ourselves to rely on, and as of today, we will only rely on ourselves. Furthermore, we are in the midst of a complex and difficult political campaign. I appeal to the Western democracies—most notably to the leader of the free world, the United States: Do not repeat the terrible mistake of 1938, when enlightened European democracies decided to sacrifice Czechoslovakia so as to reach a convenient temporary solution. Do not try to appease the Arabs at our expense; we cannot accept it. Israel will not be another Czechoslovakia; Israel will fight terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

The press conference remarks that warned of possible American appeasement of the

Arabs and betrayal of Israel were deliberate. According to a senior Sharon advisor, Sharon worked for hours on the speech at his ranch, the Sycamore farm, weighing every word carefully. Sharon's intention was to convince the world that Israel was not intransigent and would make concessions, but that it would do so on its own terms. Any deal imposed by other countries would be rejected. In other words, any attempt to "save" Israel, along the lines that Ball had suggested in 1977, would be futile.

Sharon's warning against appeasement caused a stir. That night, on October 5, 2001, at 1:30am Israel time, Bruce Riedel, the Senior Director for Near East and North African Affairs in Bush's National Security Council<sup>31</sup> called Daniel Ayalon, Sharon's foreign policy advisor, and demanded a retraction. Riedel told Ayalon that the Israeli prime minister had until dawn to issue his apology. Ayalon called Uri Shani, the Chief of the Prime Minister's Bureau, to ask whether he should wake up Sharon. "No way," Shani said, "we're not going to wake him up for this." Later that morning, Daniel Kurtzer, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, called leading Israeli Labor Party ministers in the national unity government, Peres, the foreign minister, and Binyamin "Fuad" Ben-Eliezer, the minister of defense. Kurtzer not only asked them to press Sharon to retract his statement, but suggested that they do so publicly. When Sharon got wind of this, he immediately called Kurtzer and reprimanded him, telling the ambassador that he was adding fuel to the fire.

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<sup>30</sup> Statement by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Jerusalem, October 4, 2001, transcript accessed through Voice of Israel translated by *BBC Monitoring*.

<sup>31</sup> Riedel now serves as Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

At the same time, Ari Fleischer, Bush's Press Secretary, publicly condemned Sharon's remarks, calling them "unacceptable." Yet Fleischer also used the opportunity, in an exchange with reporters, to deny any indirect Israeli responsibility for the 9/11 attacks:

QUESTION: Does the President believe that terrorists around the world get support, succor, funding, in part because of Israeli policies of occupation, settlement and reprisal and U.S. support for those policies? And as part of the campaign against terrorism, does the President believe those policies and U.S. support for them must change?

MR. FLEISCHER: You know, terrorism exists in the world in all kinds of shapes, forms, and I think it's sad to say, but if a beautiful and perfect lasting peace were brought to the Middle East today, terrorism would still exist in this world. And the President is committed in the wake of the attacks on our country on September 11th to take this campaign against those terrorists and against those who continue to harbor terrorists.

QUESTION: But in understanding the phenomenon of terrorism in order to combat it, are Israel's policies part of the problem?

MR. FLEISCHER: Terry, peace in the Middle East is intrinsically good, in its own merits, on its own, regardless of anything else that is happening in the world. And that's why the President feels so strongly that in the wake of this attack, it's important for

people in the region to seize this opportunity and recommit themselves to the peace process.

QUESTION: One more on this. Have the events of September 11th brought more urgency or changed the U.S.—the administration's approach to the peace process in the Middle East?

MR. FLEISCHER: No. The American policy toward peace in the Middle East is just as strongly committed to the peace process and is identical to the policies established prior to September 11th as it is today. Those events have not changed American policy.<sup>32</sup>

To an extent, therefore, Sharon overreacted to anticipated U.S. pressure on Israel to make concessions on the Palestinian issue. His fears were not without foundation, as there were those who felt that the United States should press Israel in the wake of 9/11. Sharon, however, failed to grasp that, beyond rhetoric, the United States was unwilling to take action on behalf of its Arab allies. As a series of articles in *The Washington Post* in 2002 revealed, there had been considerable tensions in United States-Saudi Arabia relations before 9/11, tensions stemming from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Crown Prince Abdullah, who was ruling the kingdom while King Fahd was incapacitated, was becoming increasingly angry at what he believed was the Bush Administration's indifference to what many criticized as excessive Israeli use of force during the second Palestinian *intifada* that began in September 2000. Bush's

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<sup>32</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "White House Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer," October 5, 2001, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011005-3.html>>.



August 24, 2001 comments backing Sharon on his policy of not negotiating under fire led to an extraordinarily blunt communication from Riyadh. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, under instruction from Crown Prince Abdullah, delivered a message to Powell and to Rice that has been summarized as “Starting from today, you’re from Uruguay, as they say. You [Americans] go your way, I [Saudi Arabia] go my way. From now on, we will protect our national interests, regardless of where America’s interests lie in the region.”<sup>33</sup>

According to *The Washington Post*, the United States responded by going to what appeared to be extraordinary lengths to repair the U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship, including sending a letter of reconciliation from President Bush to Crown Prince Abdullah. In his letter, Bush wrote that he supported a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and would therefore promote the peace process.<sup>34</sup> That private assurance was followed, after 9/11, by a public statement made on November 10, 2001 to the UN General Assembly in which Bush endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state, and called it “Palestine”—the first time a U.S. president had referred to such a state as “Palestine.”<sup>35</sup>

As time would tell, these were little more than token gestures towards Saudi Arabia. Sharon’s unexpected concession on the principle of a Palestinian state and his surprisingly brusque reaction to U.S. diplomacy post-9/11 were therefore preemptive actions based on the erroneous assessment that the United States would take genuine measures to appease the Arab World. Still, by taking such striking positions, Sharon communicated his concerns to Bush, and the U.S. president learned to respect the Israeli prime minister’s worries. These were probably the cleverest mistakes that Sharon had ever made.

### MARGINALIZING ARAFAT

In the months before 9/11, in a private conversation with an Israeli journalist, Sharon compared Arafat with Osama bin Laden. Sharon initially backed away from this view because he was hard-pressed to explain why he would send his son to negotiate with someone akin to bin Laden. However, after 9/11, Sharon repeated the Arafat-bin Laden equation again and again for the benefit of the Bush Administration.<sup>36</sup> After 9/11, Sharon would repeat the comparison, and in the post-9/11 context, this strategy would prove beneficial to the prime minister.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert G. Kaiser and David B. Ottaway, op.cit.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> The President said, “We are working toward a day when two states, Israel and Palestine, live peacefully together within secure and recognize borders as called for by the Security Council resolutions.” Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush Speaks to United Nations: Remarks by the President To United Nations General Assembly,” November 10, 2001, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011110-3.html>>. See Serge Schmemmann, “Arafat Thankful for Bush Remark about ‘Palestine,’” *The New York Times*, November 12, 2001, p. A1 for a description of Arafat’s reaction to the remarks. When President Bush promised Prince Bandar to refer to a Palestinian state in his speech, he was surprised at Bandar’s enthusiasm. Only after delivering it, did the President learn that his use of the name “Palestine” was a first by a United States president.

<sup>36</sup> In his June 26, 2001 meeting with President Bush, Sharon said, “I read that you said that you would not let Osama bin Laden dictate to the U.S. Everyone has his bin Laden. Arafat is our bin Laden.” William Safire, “Ariel Makes His Point to George,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2001, p. 27. On July 2, 2001 in a Likud Party meeting, Sharon repeated the analogy and said Israel would not accept Arafat’s proposal for a seven day cease fire. Despite his criticism of Arafat, Sharon defended foreign minister Shimon Peres’ meeting with Arafat the week before, see Gil Hoffman, “Sharon: Arafat won’t order us around,” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 3, 2001, p. 2.

Working in Sharon's favor was that the Bush Administration began treating Israel as a partner in the war against terrorism, not as an example of a victim of terrorism. This helped to change Bush's view of Arafat, and the president began to regard Arafat as part of the problem in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not as a factor in its resolution. Indeed, four months after 9/11, the *Karine-A* incident sealed Arafat's fate with Bush. In January 2002, Israeli commandos and naval forces intercepted a vessel, the *Karine-A*, that was carrying 50 tons of weapons from Iran. While Arafat denied any knowledge of the ship and its cargo, Israel established that the *Karine-A* was owned by the PA.<sup>37</sup>

What angered Bush was not so much the arms shipment itself but the fact that Arafat lied about it. The message was clear: Arafat was caught with a weapons shipment and lying about it, even while the United States was straining to find a negotiated solution to the ongoing violence.

Soon after the *Karine-A* affair, Bush made a fundamental alteration to U.S. policy: instead of leaning on Arafat to make changes, the United States called for a change in Palestinian leadership. There was only one favor that Bush was willing to do for Arafat—stopping the Israelis from killing or deporting the Palestinian president. The Israelis seriously considered such measures twice, but on both occasions, Bush prevented their implementa-

tion. For Bush, the fact that Arafat had been democratically elected afforded him the right not to be killed or expelled by the Israelis.

Before the Bush Administration could come down hard on Arafat, it had to take some preliminary measures to keep the rhetoric of peace alive. While this involved little more than throwing a bone to the European Union, given other upcoming U.S. foreign policy concerns such as Iraq, keeping the EU states quiescent was important. To further this aim, Secretary of State Powell headed to the Middle East to meet with Arafat in March 2002. Although the Bush Administration was issuing standard rhetoric in support of peace initiatives, it was in fact giving Israel more room for maneuver.

Israel used that freer hand on April 3, 2002 when it launched Operation Defensive Shield in response to a terrorist attack that had claimed 30 lives in Netanya on March 27, 2002, the first night of Passover. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) returned to the Palestinian cities from which it had previously withdrawn. For all practical purposes, the Israeli action abolished the distinctions, created in the Oslo Accords, between Area A and Areas B and C.<sup>38</sup> Operation Defensive Shield thereby ended the most tangible indication of emerging Palestinian sovereignty by allowing the IDF to conduct military operations in areas over which the PA was supposedly responsible. The idea behind Areas A, B and C had been that the PA would take

<sup>37</sup> James Bennett and Joel Greenberg, "Israel Seizes Ship It Says Was Arming Palestinians," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2002, p. A1.

<sup>38</sup> "The Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," also known as Oslo II, was signed on September 28, 1995. The Agreement divided the West Bank and Gaza Strip into three classification zones: Area A would be that area upon which the Palestinian Authority would have full control; Area B would be that area upon which the Palestinian Authority would exercise civil oversight and Israel would exercise security oversight; Area C would be that area upon which Israel would exercise full control.

gradual responsibility for security and that in time this would transform into Palestinian statehood. In April 2002, however, that aim was, at the very least, put aside. The Bush Administration issued statements deploring the terrorist attacks against Israelis and reprimanding Israel for using excessive force against the Palestinians. In essence, however, the Bush Administration allowed Israel to reoccupy large swathes of Palestinian land, except for the Muqata (Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah).

For Sharon, the Netanya attack changed the "rules of the game." In general, Sharon did not want to confront Bush publicly and had previously listened when the United States had called for restraint. For example, on March 19, 2002, a week before the Netanya terrorist attack, Israeli troops withdrew from Bethlehem and two other West Bank towns in the Palestinian territories because of U.S. pressure. Israel had entered the Bethlehem area to crack down on terrorists. However, a stern U.S. reaction, along with a visit to Israel by Vice President Cheney, had obliged an Israeli withdrawal.<sup>39</sup> Sharon saw the Netanya attack as too grave to warrant restraint or to accept the inevitable calls to hold back a response. When Sharon arrived in Washington DC on May 7, 2002 to meet with Bush, he made his determination clear to the U.S. president. Bush responded by endorsing Sharon's position by publicly saying that "I'm never going to tell my friend, the Prime Minister, what to do on how to handle his business. That's his

choice to make. He's a democratically elected official."<sup>40</sup>

Shortly after this critical Bush-Sharon summit, Weissglas arrived in Washington for his first meeting with Condoleezza Rice on May 12, 2002. During their discussion, Rice said in passing that Bush would refer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an upcoming speech, though she was unsure about the details. Rice said that Bush had to address the issue because of growing criticism that the U.S. government had failed to address the conflict. A few days later, the Americans asked Weissglas for ideas about what should be included in the speech. Israeli and American officials began to work together in drafting the speech—a remarkable collaboration. Sharon told Weissglas to make clear to the Americans that he would not work with Arafat under any circumstances, even if there were short intervals without violence, so-called periods of calm. These periods of calm, Sharon argued, were simply a Palestinian ruse to distract attention from Arafat's fundamental unwillingness to tackle the problem of Palestinian terrorism.

Bush's speech, in which he was to lay out his vision for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was scheduled for June 24, 2002. On the eve of the speech, Weissglas presented the White House with Israeli intelligence evidence of Arafat's support for Palestinian terrorism. Many expected that Bush's speech would provide a timeline for

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<sup>39</sup> James Bennett and Michael Gordon, "Israel is Leaving Palestinian Areas in the West Bank," *The New York Times*, March, 19, 2002, p. A6.

<sup>40</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Meets with Prime Minister Sharon , Remarks by President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon," May 7, 2002, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/05/20020507-12.html>>.

the creation of a Palestinian state, an expectation that was evident in the Arab world.<sup>41</sup> Instead, as Bush delivered his speech, it quickly became apparent that its main thrust was criticism of the Palestinian leader, criticism hardened by Weissglas' input:

I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror. I call upon them to build a practicing democracy, based on tolerance and liberty. If the Palestinian people actively pursue these goals, America and the world will actively support their efforts. If the Palestinian people meet these goals, they will be able to reach agreement with Israel and Egypt and Jordan on security and other arrangements for independence.

Today, Palestinian authorities are encouraging, not opposing, terrorism. This is unacceptable. And the United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure. This will require an externally supervised effort to rebuild and reform the Palestinian security services. The security system must have clear lines of authority and accountability and a unified chain of command.<sup>42</sup>

While many in Arab capitals had their expectations dashed by the speech, its content was not a foregone conclusion for the Israelis. Although Israeli officials had worked closely with the Americans on the text of the speech, the American side did not provide them with a copy of the finalized text that Bush was to deliver. As a result, Sharon sat in Israel nervously watching the speech live on Israeli television. The Israeli channel translated Bush's words simultaneously into Hebrew, so Sharon asked his aides to switch to CNN to allow him to hear the president's remarks in English. When Bush finished speaking, Sharon asked his aides to switch back to the Israeli channel, so that he could hear the Israeli analysis of the speech. Sharon relaxed when he heard the channel's diplomatic correspondent interpreting the speech as containing two great victories for the Israeli prime minister. First, Bush had reaffirmed unequivocally that Israel would not have to negotiate under fire, and second, U.S. policy was now to seek a replacement for Arafat.

Not only had Sharon achieved his two key aims, there was an added bonus: the United States had shifted the burden of demonstrating progress towards the goal of Middle East peace onto the Palestinians. Israel only had to sit and wait until a new Palestinian leader emerged.

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<sup>41</sup> According to *The New York Times*, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told Palestinian officials that Bush would present a three-year timetable for the creation of a Palestinian state and refer to United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (1967). *The New York Times* reported, "The Arab world, hoping for a detailed American proposal for peace and a Palestinian state, instead found a speech short on a specific timetable and long on demands for Palestinian reform," see Neil Macfarquhar, "Mideast Turmoil: The Arab World; President's Speech Is Criticized For Lacking Specific Proposals," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2002, p. A11.

<sup>42</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," June 24, 2002, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html>>.

Yet with the benefit of hindsight, Bush's speech also did something else—it unintentionally contributed to the Israeli decision to focus on unilateralism. Israel now had more freedom of action in its war against Palestinian terrorism. Indeed, Israel found that its use of targeted killings of terrorists and its military incursions into Palestinian territory were more tolerated by the United States.





## THE ROADMAP: FROM NO NEGOTIATIONS UNDER FIRE, TO NO NEGOTIATIONS

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Bush's June 24, 2002 speech was a major step towards transforming the United States-Israel relationship and U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it was only a first step. The next, significant move was the so-called Roadmap, which began life as a European Union formulated peace plan that implicitly rebuffed the approach that Bush had outlined on June 24, 2002. The European Union came up with the Roadmap as a response to Bush's rejection of Arafat and his siding with Sharon on the issue of whether Israel should negotiate under fire. For the European Union, a willingness to talk despite the violence and engagement with Arafat were vital elements of any serious approach to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israelis discovered from Palestinian sources that an EU draft of the Roadmap had been sent to Washington DC. Weissglas' initial reaction was that this information was wrong, as he had not heard anything from his NSC contacts. Although Weissglas' error in

the end had no cost to Israel, it demonstrated an inherent weakness in the backchannel—by depending excessively on a small group of officials, the Israeli perception of what was occurring within the Bush Administration was in effect controlled by a very small group of American officials.

The White House briefed the Israelis on the EU-drafted Roadmap when Sharon and his delegation arrived in Washington DC in October 2002 to meet Bush. The Israeli team's first reaction was negative and they lodged their objections with the White House. Then, in November 2002, the White House sent Israel a second, U.S.-influenced draft of the Roadmap that was more acceptable to the Israelis. Nonetheless, Sharon still had grave concerns, which prompted him to establish a special task force to work on the Roadmap headed by Major General Giora Eiland, the Head of the IDF Planning and Policy Directorate, Ephraim Halevy, the Israeli National Security Advisor, and Uzi Arad, the political advisor to Minister of Foreign Affairs Netanyahu.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Netanyahu was Minister of Foreign Affairs from November 6, 2002 to February 28, 2003.



The Israeli special task force went through the White House's Roadmap draft line by line and came up with 59 comments on the initial November 2002 text. Some comments were based on long-held Sharon principles, such as the demand that Palestinian armed groups disarm before the IDF would withdraw from Palestinian population centers in the West Bank. Other objections, however, were formulated by Arad on behalf of Netanyahu for a number of reasons, including to impress Netanyahu's personal constituency in the Likud Party. A further U.S. Roadmap draft was written up and shown to the Israelis. While this draft suited the Israelis better, they still had concerns.

The Israelis seemed to be making progress, but then Iraq intruded. In March 2003, Rice asked Weissglas for explicit Israeli support of the Roadmap as a means of relieving the political pressure that was piling onto Bush's close ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the lead-up to launching the Iraq war. The ruling Labour Party was deeply divided over the prospect of the Iraq war and there had been a massive demonstration in London in February 2003 against the war. Blair therefore needed to demonstrate a tangible reward for his pro-U.S. stance, which in terms of British opinion leaders and the media meant being seen to succeed in encouraging the United States to reactivate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

While Israel was being pushed to adopt the Roadmap to assuage global U.S. concerns, another problem started to emerge—the text of the Roadmap could not satisfy all sides. In April 2003, an Israeli delegation arrived in Washington DC with 14 reservations on this latest Roadmap draft. The Americans considered these 14 reservations but, to obtain Palestinian support, declined to include them in the Roadmap, instead making them an addendum. As a result, the United States in effect ended up with multiple Roadmap drafts. On April 30, 2003, the Roadmap was presented to both sides.<sup>44</sup> The Palestinians approved the Roadmap after just 10 minutes of debate.

In Israel, there was heated debate within Sharon's cabinet. On May 25, 2003, after much argument, the cabinet voted 12 – 7 in favor of the Roadmap, with 4 abstentions.<sup>45</sup> Following the vote, Weissglas called Abrams to inform him that Israel was accepting the Roadmap conditionally—for Israel its 14 reservations were critical. The fact that Israelis and Palestinians had each separately endorsed a different version of the Roadmap portended ill.

It took Sharon some time to understand the implications of the Roadmap. Initially, he interpreted it as a strategy to compel Israel to negotiate under fire, not least because it had been drafted by EU leaders whom Sha-

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<sup>44</sup> For a summary of the Roadmap, see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East: Israeli/Palestinian Reciprocal Action, Quartet Support," July 16, 2003, available at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/22520.htm>>. For the full text, see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Press Statement, Office of the Spokesman, "A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," April 30, 2003, available at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/20062.htm>>.

<sup>45</sup> Greg Myre, "Sharon Defends Peace Plan Against Critics in Likud," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2003 p. 12. On May 27, 2003, *Ha'aretz* published unofficial text of the 14 reservations: "Israel's road map reservations," available at <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=297230>>.

ron did not trust. In time, however, Sharon came to understand that the Roadmap was consistent with Bush's June 24, 2002 speech that rejected Israel having to talk while being attacked. The Roadmap's three phases pulled the Palestinians and the European Union, its initial drafter, into Sharon's framework for dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—the suspension of Palestinian violence became a precondition for movement on issues of key concern to the Palestinians. In this manner, the Roadmap confirmed the shift in the burden of responsibility for advancing any peace process onto the Palestinians. The first phase of the Roadmap explicitly demanded that the Palestinians dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism, a daunting task

and a political mountain that no Palestinian government had the will or the ability to climb. Even if the Palestinians did manage to fulfill their enormous first phase requirements, their reward was the second phase of the Roadmap that offered them a state with provisional borders.

Some U.S. officials quickly understood that the Roadmap was not, as Blair in Britain and some in the United States had hoped, a means of moving peacemaking forward. Instead it was a way to consolidate the new *status quo* of no negotiations. The feeling at the NSC in mid-2003 was that the result of the Roadmap was a series of tests that they could not possibly pass.



## PROPOSING DISENGAGEMENT

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While Sharon had won the battle in Washington DC over the Roadmap, his respite from domestic political problems was brief and he soon began to feel that he was losing the battle at home. The problem for Israeli political leaders is that while Israeli-Arab negotiations are a risky, high stakes game, doing nothing and maintaining the *status quo* also entails great costs. The Israeli public quickly grows impatient when there is no movement. This is known in Israel as the “bicycle rule”—prime ministers who do not pedal, and show no signs of movement, will fall.

Pressure on Sharon came from the Israeli Left. While roundly defeated in the 2001 and 2003 elections, the Israeli Left seized the opportunity of the lack of progress in peacemaking to revive itself. Again, true to Sharon’s style, he did not see it coming because his focus was above all on the Palestinians. Sharon’s

initial fear, which emerged in June 2003 was that his relationship with the Americans was at risk because of the emergence of a new PA prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas (aka Abu Mazen), a moderate leader who had been imposed on Arafat as a way of providing a Palestinian interlocutor that Bush would deal with.

Sharon and Abbas formally endorsed the Roadmap in a ceremony on June 4, 2003 in Aqaba, Jordan, in the presence of President Bush and King Abdullah II of Jordan. While the event contained all the pomp that such ceremonies warrant, behind the scenes, matters did not proceed smoothly for Sharon. Bush and Sharon clashed over Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and its failure to observe limits on settlement activity. A key demand of phase one of the Roadmap was that Israel stop all settlement activity including so-called natural growth.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Natural growth refers to population increase due to births. According to the Israeli group Shalom Ahshav (Peace Now), the natural growth rate in West Bank and Gaza Strip settlements was 3.5 percent in 2003. Dror Etkes and Lara Friedman, “Taking Inventory of the West Bank - September 2005,” Shalom Ahshav (Peace Now), available at <<http://www.peacenow.org.il/site/en/peace.asp?pi=62&docid=1498>>.

Until the formal adoption of the Roadmap, however, Israel had been given the concession of being permitted to continue natural growth of settlements—a concession to which Bush had agreed. The problem was that the Israelis were expanding the settlements beyond their natural growth. At a certain point, Bush took Sharon aside and asked why Israel was violating its commitments. Sharon replied sharply, “What do you expect me to do—to ask the settlers’ wives to have abortions?” Bush was stunned, later saying to an aide: “What does Sharon think, that I’m stupid, that I don’t understand what natural growth is, that I don’t know how many vacant apartments there are in the West Bank settlements?”

Worse, Sharon was disturbed by Bush’s warm public embrace of Abbas. Sharon feared that Abbas would capitalize on Aqaba and build a relationship of his own with Bush. To an extent, this explains why Sharon would prove reluctant to help Abbas solidify his power as Palestinian prime minister, a policy that ran contrary to the advice of the IDF Chief of the General Staff and members of his cabinet. Squeezed between Arafat, Sharon, and his own personal weakness, Abbas would indeed fail to aggregate the necessary influence required to lead the PA. As a result, in early September 2003, Abbas resigned as Palestinian prime minister. For Bush, Abbas’ resignation left a bad taste in his mouth, not only because it set back the Roadmap, but because he saw it as a demonstration of

weakness, which offended Bush’s vision of leadership. Bush did not blame Sharon, however. On the contrary, Bush’s appreciation for Sharon’s leadership qualities could not have been greater, and Abbas would continue to pay the price for years to come, struggling to regain White House support when he later became PA president in 2005.

On the domestic front, Sharon began facing political pressure from the resurgent Israeli Left. The lack of progress in the months following the Aqaba summit stimulated others to offer peace proposals of their own. In September 2003, a group of Israeli Air Force Reserve pilots signed a public letter that blamed Sharon for the paralysis in the peace process and they threatened to refuse to serve if called up for duty. In November 2003, four former Directors of the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency, Israel’s domestic intelligence service) gave a joint interview to the daily *Yediot Ahronot*. With the clout of years of service fighting Palestinian terrorism, the four men endorsed a peace plan, “The People’s Voice,” that one of them, Ami Ayalon, had drafted with a former senior-level Palestinian official, Sari Nusseibeh, in September 2002.<sup>47</sup> Then, on December 1, 2003, Yassir Abed Rabbo, a former Palestinian Minister of Information, and Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli Minister of Justice, launched a proposed agreement on permanent-status issues in Geneva, dubbed the Geneva Initiative, that resurrected the Clinton Parameters of 2001 that Sharon had opposed.<sup>48</sup> While

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<sup>47</sup> Nusseibeh is the President of Al Quds University in Jerusalem and a former Palestine Liberation Organization representative in Jerusalem. Following publication of the petition in *Ha’aretz*, the two men signed the document on July 27, 2002 and thousands of Israelis and Palestinians the following suit in a petition campaign. An archive version is available at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20050228084802/http://www.mifkad.org.il/en/>>.

<sup>48</sup> See “Geneva Initiative - Israeli Palestinian Conflict Peace Agreement,” available at <<http://www.geneva-accord.org/>>.

Beilin was not politically strong in Israel, the Geneva Initiative garnered considerable attention and support abroad. These calls for the revival of the peace process had some resonance with the Israeli public, and Sharon knew that he needed to act to prevent the traditional peacemaking process, which he feared, from restarting.

Feeling this growing pressure, and seeing the Israeli Left capitalizing on the lack of movement on the Palestinian issue, Sharon initiated his own plan for unilateralism, which he publicly announced on December 18, 2003 at the Herzliya Conference.<sup>49</sup> Sharon's proposed unilateral withdrawal, from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, constituted a sea-change in his approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the possible exception of Sharon's sons, nobody can testify as to why exactly the decision was taken. In addition to mounting political pressure within Israel, there were numerous other factors that may have contributed to Sharon's radical decision. In particular, Weissglas convinced Sharon that the Bush Administration would eventually have to abandon the Roadmap and would, under pressure, return to pressing Israel to negotiate under fire. Weissglas quoted Rice as telling him that "If you want us to stand by you in the principle of no negotiations

under fire, you have to do something bold, something meaningful. You have to give us a justification."

There were probably also personal reasons for Sharon to take a bold approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two investigations regarding Sharon's financial problems were underway, one targeting his political fundraising and the other his family's connections to a real estate developer who was indicted on bribery charges. Sharon may have believed that the only way that he could distract Israeli media attention would be to initiate a daring move that would steal the thunder of the Israeli Left and possibly even win its support.

Long-term strategic considerations, that were not unique to Sharon, also had an influence. Israel had long been keen to be rid of responsibility for the Gaza Strip, and the humanitarian and security issues that came along with this territory. Sharon believed that he could persuade the Bush Administration that by leaving the Gaza Strip, Israel would be relinquishing its responsibility over the territory and thereby hand the humanitarian burden to the PA. Also, Sharon had concluded that, because of domestic and international pressures, Israel could not hold onto the Gaza Strip indefinitely. Therefore,

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<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, the concept of unilateral disengagement was first proposed by Amram Mitzna, the Israeli Labor Party leader. A key element of Mitzna's campaign platform in the January 2003 elections was to return to the negotiating table with Arafat, and if no deal was reached, implement a plan to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and portions of the West Bank. Harvey Morris, "Labour's vision of victory in Israeli elections obscured by clouds," *Financial Times* (London), January 22, 2003, p. 10. After the elections, Mitzna said he would join a national unity government if Sharon agreed to withdraw from Netzarim, Kefar Darom and part of Gush Qatif in the Gaza Strip. Sharon effectively rebuffed the offer when he chose the National Religious Party to join his coalition. *Israel TV Channel 1*, Jerusalem, 19:40 GMT, February 11, 2003, accessed through Lexis Nexis, transcript dated February 12, 2003; Conal Urquhart, "Labour out in cold as Sharon shifts to right," *The Guardian* (London), February 24, 2003, p. 13, available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,901574,00.html>>.

the notion of a Gaza Strip withdrawal appealed to Sharon because it would appear to be a concession, which would win Israel praise, but would in some sense be a non-concession, because eventually Israel would have to withdraw from there anyway.

Within Israel, the strongest argument for giving up the Gaza Strip was demographic, an argument that Sharon would deploy politically to gain support. The demographic argument was that rapid Palestinian population growth would lead to a situation in which Jews would be a minority of the population in land under Israeli control (Israel proper, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip). The Israeli Left and Center-Left argued that such a development, in which Jews ruled over a majority of Arabs, would be anathema to

the notion of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state. Consequently, the Israeli Left and Center-Left promoted an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, using the argument that doing so would address the demographic issue and prevent Jews from becoming the minority in Israeli-controlled land. Sharon never found this argument convincing. His answer to the demographic argument was that the Middle East had to be considered in terms of populations, and not borders, and that Jewish Israelis were already, and would always be, a minority within the Arab World. So although Sharon did not agree with the demographic argument, he understood its political appeal and he astutely used it to mobilize the support of his political enemies on the Israeli Left and Center-Left for pulling out of the Gaza Strip.







## THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION REACTS TO DISENGAGEMENT

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Sharon spent the three months before the public unveiling of the disengagement plan working behind the scenes to shore up American support.<sup>50</sup> Weissglas spent September 3 and 4, 2003 in Washington DC with an Israeli delegation introducing the concept of Gaza Disengagement to the Bush Administration. The Israelis did not present one plan, however. Instead, they had four options with them that Israel was considering:

- Plan A—a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip alone, pulling out from all 21 settlements in the area and bringing out some 9,000 settlers;
- Plan B—a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four Israeli settlements in the northern West Bank;
- Plan C—a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, as well as 17 settlements, about 7,500 settlers, from the West Bank, known as the “Eiland Plan” after the head of the IDF Planning Directorate;

- Plan D—a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and most of the West Bank.

As it turned out, Weissglas and his team never raised Plan D with the Americans, although two and a half years later, in May 2006, a variant of Plan D came back to life as Olmert’s “Realignment” Plan. Instead, Plans A, B, and C became the focus of an intensive series of U.S.-Israeli meetings in Washington DC, Jerusalem, and Rome in the run-up to Sharon’s December 18, 2003 public announcement.

There was no doubt that the United States would react positively to Sharon’s plan to leave occupied territories. Still, Sharon wanted more than just a *pro forma* endorsement from Bush. For political and diplomatic reasons, he needed a strong return on the considerable investment of political capital that Gaza Disengagement required. Within Israel, Sharon needed robust U.S. support to help him win his battle with the right-wing of his own Likud Party that wanted, in line with

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<sup>50</sup> It has sometimes been assumed the Rome meeting between Sharon and Abrams on November 18, 2003 was the first discussion between the two governments on the disengagement plan (see, for example, Peter Slevin, “Delicate Maneuvers Led To U.S.-Israeli Stance,” *The Washington Post*, April 16, 2004, p. A 01). As a matter of fact, this meeting focused predominantly on issues relating to Syria.

Begin's vision, to hold on to the Gaza Strip. On the international level, he wanted formal U.S. recognition that Gaza Disengagement constituted implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) in relation to the Gaza Strip.

According to a source close to Sharon, the initial U.S. reaction to the Gaza Disengagement proposal was enthusiastic. However, it did not take long for the Bush Administration to become alarmed at the Arab world's opposition to the prospect of Israeli unilateralism. Moreover, the United States came to suspect, probably correctly, that Sharon was giving up Gaza only to strengthen Israel's grip on the West Bank—just as Begin had conceded the Sinai to Egypt to entrench the Israeli position in Gaza and the West Bank. To mitigate this possibility, many in the Bush Administration argued that Sharon should also have to evacuate parts of the West Bank to gain U.S. endorsement of his plan. In addition, according to an Israeli official, the Bush Administration seemed confused by the changing nature of Israeli demands. In the past, Israel had been firm in demanding a cessation of Palestinian violence before giving up land, a position articulated on numerous occasions and spelled out in the Roadmap. Lastly, the Bush Administration was concerned that a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip would politically strengthen terrorist groups, specifically Hamas, who would be able to claim the Israeli exit as a victory for their violence.

The debate in the Bush Administration was not about accepting Gaza Disengagement (that had been conceded from the beginning), but over whether the United States should reward Israel for its actions, and if so, how. Some argued that there was little reason to re-

ward Israel for a unilateral move because unilateralism, by definition, meant implementing policies that furthered Israel's national interest. Some in the White House disagreed and argued that Sharon would require strong U.S. political backing to overcome the inevitable domestic opposition to Gaza Disengagement.

At the same time, Sharon was using the backchannel mechanism to strengthen his relationship with Bush. In line with Sharon's original instructions on how to manage United States-Israel relations, Weissglas worked to comply with American requests as much as possible. A prime example of the backchannel in operation, and the trust that it created, came after a terrorist attack in Tel Aviv on September 19, 2002 that killed 6 Israelis. The IDF responded by moving into Ramallah and was on the verge of arresting Yassir Arafat. Kurtzer, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, went to see Sharon at the prime minister's ranch to warn him of the severe reaction from pro-American Arab countries in the event that anything should happen to Arafat. Sharon listened, but his response was to dispatch Weissglas to Washington with a detailed explanation of why Israel should take control of Arafat's compound, the Muqata. After 10 minutes of delivering Sharon's explanations to Rice, Weissglas was interrupted by Rice, who said, "Look, I hear you. Don't be mad, but what you say is completely irrelevant. We are in the middle of building support for a very tough operation in Iraq. It is extremely important for there to be a coalition. We never interfered with an Israeli move that was important for security, but this move of yours is meant only to please Israeli public opinion. President Bush is the best thing to ever have happened to you—he looks at Sharon as a partner. You don't do this to a partner." Weissglas told Rice he would

speak with Sharon and would return with the prime minister's answer. He then went to a coffee shop down the block from the White House and called Sharon. The Israeli prime minister reacted angrily to Rice's request to spare Arafat, but said he would consider it nonetheless. Weissglas returned to Rice and told her: "I know the man. He will never hurt a partner."

Within a few hours Sharon ordered the IDF to cease its operation in Ramallah and Israeli forces were pulled back from the Muqata. On his way back to Israel, during a stopover in London, Weissglas spoke with Sharon's military secretary, a serving general in the IDF. The prime minister's military secretary complained to Weissglas that American diplomats were driving in the vicinity of the Muqata to determine whether Israeli forces were redeploying as promised. Weissglas immediately phoned Rice who replied that if Sharon had promised to move his troops, then the United States should trust his word and had no need to check. Within a few minutes, the U.S. diplomatic vehicles disappeared. Later, Rice's deputy, Hadley, would tell Weissglas that Israel's compliance had solidified bilateral relations: "We can argue about one issue or another, but a promise is a promise. It took you only hours to respond to our request and [this] upgraded our relations."\*

Sharon, for his part, remained steadfast in his plan and in his push for a firm American endorsement. In February/March 2004, Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, met with a team of Israelis in a res-

taurant in Abu Ghosh, near Jerusalem. One of the Israelis present recalls Hadley saying that "we will return boldness for boldness." Namely, the magnitude of the Israeli withdrawal would dictate the generosity of the Bush Administration's response. For an evacuation from only the Gaza Strip, the Israelis were led to believe that they should not expect more than a presidential reiteration that the United States would guarantee to maintain the sequence of the Roadmap.

During the meeting in Abu Ghosh, Weissglas argued to Hadley that Israel was demonstrating considerable boldness by relinquishing lands that in the past it would only have been expected to evacuate as part of a peace agreement. Therefore, Weissglas asserted, Bush should compensate Israel by issuing assurances on key permanent-status issues in his public reaction to the disengagement plan. Specifically, Weissglas wanted Bush to address the three main issues in a manner that would align with the Israeli position: the future of Jerusalem, how future boundaries would affect major Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank, and the question of the Palestinians refugees. Hadley rebuffed Weissglas on Jerusalem, responding that it was a very complicated issue. On the question of boundaries and the settlements, Hadley said that he was not sure that Bush would agree to a substantial shift in the U.S. position, which was not to allow Israel to draw boundaries that would incorporate major settlement blocs. On what seemed to be the least difficult issue, refugees, however, Hadley said that he believed Bush would come up with something.

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\* The original version of this monograph stated in error that the conversation between Weissglas and Rice, and the related events, occurred in September 2003. While Weissglas did meet with Rice in September 2003, the above conversation and the related events occurred in September 2002. This version of the monograph has been corrected to account for the error.

Despite Hadley's caution, in the end, the U.S. response proved to be more generous on the issue of boundaries and the settlements. The formal U.S. reaction to Sharon's disengagement plan came in the form of a letter of assurance from President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon in support of Gaza Disengagement issued on April 14, 2004. While the letter was seen as a victory for Sharon, there was a difficult battle over its text that tested the Sharon-Bush backchannel to the full.

After receiving a copy of Bush's draft letter of assurance, Weissglas called Abrams on Saturday, April 10, 2004. Weissglas asked if the text he was looking at was final. Abrams replied that it was basically final. Picking up on the nuance, that basically final means not final, Weissglas feared that the State Department would get its hands on the letter and make changes. To head off this possibility, Weissglas flew to Washington DC that evening, accompanied by Shalom Turgeman, Sharon's diplomatic advisor. They arrived on Sunday morning, April 11, 2004 and worked with Hadley on the final wording of the Bush letter of assurance until midnight. Sharon telephoned from his farm every few minutes, nervously inquiring as to developments.

Despite Weissglas' efforts, a problem arose. After Hadley, Weissglas and their assistants had agreed to the final wording of the Bush letter to Sharon, a copy of the draft was sent to Jonathan B. Schwartz, a Deputy Legal Adviser at the State Department, to review. Schwartz requested seven changes to the letter. The Hadley-Weissglas draft had stated that the solution to the Palestinian refugee problem would be the establishment of a Palestinian state. Schwartz suggested soft-

ening this by adding the words "as a general principle." In addition, Schwartz proposed changing the wording on the future of the settlements blocs so that it was more consistent with the Clinton Parameters' concept of territorial swaps.

When Weissglas learned of Schwartz's proposed changes, he called Secretary of State Powell to threaten that Sharon would cancel his upcoming trip to Washington DC. Powell promised to review Schwartz's suggestion and then contact the Israelis. At 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday, April, 13, 2004, Hadley initiated a conference call with Powell and Rice to discuss the state of play on the Bush letter of assurance. At the same time, over in Israel, Sharon called together his two sons and several of his closest confidants to review the draft and Schwartz's suggested changes. Together, they concluded that if the Americans sought to issue the letter with Schwartz's changes included, then Sharon could not go to Washington DC.

At noon on the same day, Washington DC time, Hadley called Weissglas, who was still in the city, to inform him that there was a new version of the letter. In this latest version, five of the seven points to which Schwartz had objected remained unchanged. The State Department's legal officer had been overruled. Weissglas faxed the new version of the letter to Sharon, who looked it over and said the text looked too watered down from what Weissglas and Hadley had agreed upon on April 11, 2004. Weissglas, the loyal servant, also knew how to manage his boss. He therefore called Daniel Reisner, the chief international law advisor to the IDF, and asked him to review the letter. Reisner made four minor

comments on the new version of the letter, but, more usefully, he judged that the letter as a whole went beyond the scope of any previous commitment by a U.S. president. In the past, the basic U.S. position had been that the settlements were an obstacle to peace and that there needed to be a just solution to the refugee problem. Sensing the importance of this judgment, Weissglas suggested that Sharon speak directly to Reisner. The IDF international law officer told the prime minister that he did not believe that Bush would sign the letter as it made such dramatic changes to longstanding U.S. foreign policy positions. Appeased, Sharon called Weissglas and asked impatiently when the Americans would approve the new version of the letter.

By this time in the United States, Bush and most of his senior-level officials were returning by air to Washington DC from Crawford, Texas. Weissglas telephoned Hadley and said Sharon was waiting to leave from Israel for the Bush-Sharon meeting, the event at which the letter would be unveiled, but he first needed definitive confirmation that the new version, that did not have all Jonathan Schwartz's proposed changes, had been approved. Otherwise, the prime minister's aircraft would not take off. Hadley told Weissglas that Rice, who was traveling ahead of Bush, was due to land in Washington DC in a few minutes time, and that she would read the new version and decide. Weissglas tele-

phoned Sharon to delay his departure until they had received Rice's reaction. Rice finally landed and gave her approval to the wording of the new version, thus allowing Sharon to depart Israel for the United States.

After all of the debate over the text of the President's letter, the United States gave Sharon a strong return on his investment. Bush's April 14, 2004 letter of assurance was a positive reaction to Gaza Disengagement and contained major changes in the United States' longstanding positions on Israel's final borders and Palestinian refugees, but not on Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup>

According to a U.S. official, Bush's strong support for Sharon's Gaza plan was to a significant degree personal. Bush believed that a leader should lead, initiate, and be the "decider." Moreover, Bush understood how difficult it was for Sharon to promote Gaza Disengagement, which made him admire the Israeli prime minister's political courage. However, American support for Gaza Disengagement was not without its demands. The United States sought Israeli concessions in the form of a letter that Weissglas had to send to Rice. The Weissglas-Rice letter of April 18, 2004 specified six Israeli commitments. Israel was to:

- 1) Freeze settlement activity;
- 2) Evacuate unauthorized settlements;

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<sup>51</sup> Regarding borders, the letter stated: "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion. It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities." Regarding refugees, the letter stated: "It seems clear that an agreed, just, fair, and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel." Office of the Press Secretary, "Letter From President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon," April 14, 2004, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040414-3.html>>.

- 3) Remove roadblocks in the West Bank;
- 4) Transfer tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority;
- 5) Base the route of the Security Barrier, then under construction, on security, rather than political considerations; and,
- 6) Ensure that Gaza Disengagement comply with the Roadmap.<sup>52</sup>

At the end of Sharon's April 2004 visit to Washington DC, as the Israeli prime minister was about to return home, Hadley spoke with Weissglas on the tarmac at the airport and said: "I believe we made history. Though I didn't like the way we did it, at the end, it was done."

### THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT REACTS TO DISENGAGEMENT

Weissglas advised Sharon upon his return to Israel to exploit the momentum of the April 2004 Washington summit and immediately bring the Bush-Sharon letter before the full Israeli cabinet for approval. Sharon initially agreed, but then other advisors convinced him not to bypass member of his Likud Party. These advisors argued that he should wait until the Likud Party referendum, scheduled for early May 2004, because with the president's letter in hand, he would gain the party's support. Sharon agreed and delayed the cabinet discussion. The anticipated Likud endorsement of Gaza Disengagement never materialized. Instead, Likud Party members

soundly defeated the proposal on May 2, 2004 by a vote of 60 percent to 39 percent, causing many of Sharon's closest advisors to argue for jettisoning disengagement.<sup>53</sup>

That was precisely what Sharon did not do. Instead, he ignored the Likud Party vote and on June 6, 2004 put President Bush's letter to a debate in the inner security cabinet. Before the inner cabinet voted, two of Sharon's closest friends, Uri Shani, Weissglas' predecessor as Chief of the Prime Minister's Bureau, and Reuven Adler, went to Netanyahu, the strongest opponent of Gaza Disengagement, and worked out an agreement with him. Netanyahu would vote for the Bush-Sharon letter if the government reduced Gaza Disengagement to the evacuation of only three isolated settlements: Netzarim, Kfar Darom and Morag. Sharon was unhappy with this compromise and felt his Likud ministers were abandoning him.

Realizing that Netanyahu would exploit any weakness, Sharon decided to put Gaza Disengagement to a vote in the full cabinet. In that wider arena, Sharon carried the day. The full cabinet endorsed the disengagement plan by a vote of 14 – 7, thanks to compromise language formulated by Tzipi Livni, the minister of justice from Sharon's Likud Party. Livni's compromise stated that while the cabinet vote would approve disengagement in full, each step of the disengagement's implementation would need prior approval by the cabinet. In effect, Livni spared Sharon the embarrassment of a cabinet defeat by telling

<sup>52</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Letter from Dov Weissglas, Chief of the PM's Bureau, to National Security Adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice," April 18, 2004, available at <<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Reference+Documents/Letter+Weissglas-Rice+18-Apr-2004.htm>>.

<sup>53</sup> Greg Myre and Elissa Gootman, "Sharon Suffers a Party Setback on his Gaza Plan," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2004, p.1.

the ministers that they would have the chance to change their minds. This politically astute framework was in practice rendered inconsequential because, under pressure from the IDF, Gaza Disengagement was implemented in days instead of weeks. The settlers and soldiers had left Gaza before the cabinet had the opportunity to sit and vote.

### THE REVERBERATIONS OF DISENGAGEMENT

The reaction in the European Union to President Bush's April 14, 2004 letter endorsing Gaza Disengagement was very negative. According to a Sharon aide, the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, told an Israeli delegation visiting Brussels at the time that the Bush letter was a stab in the EU's back and represented the destruction of the peace process. The letter, Solana argued, robbed the Palestinians of their right to negotiate over the permanent-status issues of refugees and borders. Solana conveyed a similar message to the Bush Administration.

The European Union's bitter reaction would have a lasting effect that would be felt after Sharon left the political scene. When Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert came to Washington DC on May 23, 2006 to sell his West Bank disengagement plan, the memory of the strong EU reaction to the Bush April 14, 2004 letter was still in the Americans' minds.<sup>54</sup> Rice, who by then had become Secretary of

State, instructed Hadley, who had succeeded her as National Security Advisor, to remind the Israeli delegation of the vigor of the EU reaction to the Bush letter of assurance. The Americans were signaling to the Israelis that it would be impossible to provide a similar level of support for any further unilateral Israeli withdrawal, particularly of the kind that Olmert was advocating.

The European Union's displeasure notwithstanding, Gaza Disengagement achieved Sharon's goal of heading off outside pressure and put the peace process on hold. As Weissglas told the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* in a perhaps too revealing interview:

The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that's necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians....The disengagement plan makes it possible for Israel to park conveniently in an interim situation that distances us as far as possible from political pressure...

After all, what have I been shouting for the past year? That I found a device, in cooperation with the management of the world [i.e. the United States], to ensure that there will be no stopwatch here. That there will be no timetable to implement the settlers' nightmare. I have postponed that nightmare indefinitely. Because what I effectively agreed to with

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<sup>54</sup> Olmert began using the term "Realignment" when he met with President Bush on May 23, 2006. Prior to this, he had used the terms "Convergence" and "Consolidation." For a discussion, see William Safire, "On Language: Diplolingo," *The New York Times*, Magazine, June 11, 2006, p. 20; and Joshua Mitnick, "Olmert asks for a word with Bush," *The Washington Times*, May 25, 2006, p. A15, available at <<http://www.washtimes.com/world/20060522-110411-3972r.htm>>.



the Americans was that part of the settlements would not be dealt with at all, and the rest will not be dealt with until the Palestinians turn into Finns. That is the significance of what we did. The significance is the freezing of the political process. And when you freeze that process you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and you prevent a discussion about the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package that is called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed from our agenda indefinitely. And all this with authority and permission. All with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress. What more could have been anticipated? What more could have been given to the settlers?<sup>55</sup>

There were other advantages to Gaza Disengagement for Sharon. On a political level, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza boosted Sharon's personal credibility within Israel and with the international community—even in the European Union there was some praise for the Gaza withdrawal and at the United Nations, Sharon actually received a hero's welcome. It also cleared away all the minor concerns that the Bush Administration had had over Israeli actions. Before Gaza Disengagement, the Bush Administration would apply pressure on Israel regarding checkpoints, illegal settlements, and the movement of Palestinian goods and people within the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza. However, once the Americans saw Sharon's persistence in evacuating the Gaza

Strip and northern West Bank, U.S. pressure on these issues mostly ceased. Israel did not have to fulfill the six commitments spelled out in Weissglas' April 18, 2006 letter to Rice because the White House never applied pressure.

Sharon took a calculated risk by withdrawing from the whole of the Gaza Strip, including the Philadelphi Corridor, the narrow band of territory between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. This complete evacuation went against the strong recommendations of all of Israel's security agencies, who argued that a direct link between the Gaza Strip and Egypt would lead to arms and terrorist smuggling. Sharon, however, was adamant that the United States would only recognize that Israel had relinquished all responsibility for the Gaza Strip if Israeli control over the Philadelphi Corridor ended. Yet, formal recognition by the United States that Israel was no longer responsible for Gaza never came. A key reason was that Weissglas did not press the Americans for such a statement. Weissglas feared that by asking for such an acknowledgment, Israel would implicitly accept that the occupation would end only when it withdrew to the 1949 ceasefire lines that had been its *de facto* boundaries until 1967. In that way, Israel would strengthen the precedent that Begin had set in the late 1970s in the Sinai of complete withdrawal to the lines on June 4, 1967, which Sharon was intent on avoiding in the West Bank.

The Palestinians also contributed to blocking Sharon's plan to receive this important dip-

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<sup>55</sup> Dov Weissglas interview with Ari Shavit, "The Big Freeze," *Ha'aretz Magazine*, October 8, 2004.

lomatic recognition. At the heart of Sharon's Gaza Disengagement vision was a strategy of shifting Palestinian orientation away from Israel and towards Egypt. Sharon wanted the PA to funnel trade through the Rafah crossing point with Egypt and away from the Karni crossing point into Israel, which would justify his claim that Israel was no longer in charge of the Gaza Strip. The PA rejected this proposal. Following multiple negotiating sessions in the fall of 2005, first with James Wolfensohn, the former President of the World Bank who had become the Middle East diplomatic Quartet's Special Envoy, and then Secretary Rice, Israel was forced to accept a deal that left the Karni checkpoint open for trade and the Erez crossing open for passengers. Contrary to Sharon's wish, Palestinian trade and travelers continued to flow through Israel until the daily launching of Qassam rockets from Gaza at Israeli towns caused Israel to close the crossings. In a series of back-and-forth moves, Israel reopened the crossings, and then closed them again.

The process of negotiating Gaza Disengagement, both within the Israeli political system and with the Americans, was a Herculean effort that extracted a staggering amount of energy from Sharon. During Sharon's last six months in office few Israelis were aware

of how exhausted he had become. In the weeks leading up to the withdrawal from Gaza, Sharon began to distance himself mentally from a host of issues, including the daily decisions that were needed to implement the disengagement, the demonstrations in the streets, and infighting within his Likud Party. Some close to the prime minister viewed this self-distancing as a political calculation to shield him from being linked to what many in Israel believed would be a catastrophe—many predicted that disengagement would fail and might cause civil strife, and possibly violence, within Israeli society. In retrospect, the distancing probably occurred for physical and psychological, not political reasons. Sharon appears to have grown mentally fatigued at having to address tense and emotional issues many times every day.

As a result, Weissglas' influence over daily decisions grew and his leeway intensified.<sup>56</sup> In the aftermath of the disengagement, while Weissglas managed the American "account," Sharon shifted away from the Palestinian issue and international politics and returned to what he did best, waging political battles. Nobody was to know that it would be his last hurrah. On November 21, 2005, Sharon left the Likud Party that he had helped to form, to set up his own Kadima (Forward) Party.

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<sup>56</sup> Some critics of Sharon, including the former speaker of the Knesset, Rubi Rivlin and the former Chief of Staff Moshe "Bogey" Ya'alon, maintain that Weissglas' dominance over the decision-making process occurred even earlier—in 2003, during the crucial period when Sharon moved from supporting the Roadmap to pressing for Gaza Disengagement.



## OLMERT'S RISE TO POWER: THE ACCIDENTAL HEIR

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Israel, recovering from the shock of Gaza Disengagement and the political “big bang” of Sharon leaving Likud and forming Kadima, had another surprise waiting for it—the sudden end of Sharon’s career and the installation of a new prime minister. On December 18, 2005, Sharon suffered a minor stroke. After a few days in the hospital in Jerusalem, during which Olmert, the Israeli Vice Premier, became the acting prime minister and acting head of the Kadima Party, Sharon took the reins of power back into his hands. Just as he was about to have a minor heart operation, Sharon was incapacitated by a major stroke on January 4, 2006, and Olmert took over again.

The seriousness of Sharon’s illness meant that the mantle of the premiership, of a new political party, and of Israeli unilateralism were thrust upon Olmert, a man unprepared for the burden. Olmert’s rise to power was largely accidental. When Sharon formed his Likud-dominated government following his election victory in 2003, he realized that he had a serious personnel problem. Sharon

had promised to make Olmert the minister of finance. However, he could not do so because political considerations obliged him to give this post to Netanyahu. Denied the post that he had expected, Olmert felt slighted and threatened to retire from politics. One of Sharon’s confidants advised Sharon to offer Olmert the post of Vice Prime Minister, a position with a high-sounding name but with little responsibility other than substituting for the prime minister in the event that he cannot fulfill his duties. Sharon’s first reaction to this proposal was that Olmert would never agree, but he was wrong. Asked at the time by a reporter as to why he accepted the position, Olmert explained that “Sharon is not a young man. Who knows what will happen later in his term.”

Sharon’s sudden removal from politics during the election campaign forced Kadima to portray Olmert as his natural heir. Contrary to the Kadima propaganda, however, Olmert was never truly close to Sharon, nor was he a member of the prime minister’s inner circle. It is also unclear as to whether they shared a

vision of how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be resolved. Before Israelis had even voted, with Sharon in a coma in the hospital, and the untried Kadima Party fighting a difficult election campaign, Olmert boldly announced that, if elected, he would unilaterally withdraw from most of the West Bank. One of his political associates even suggested the withdrawal would include Arab suburbs of east Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> Although Olmert has portrayed this plan, which later became known as “Realignment” as a successor to Gaza Disengagement, some of Sharon’s confidants reject this notion. They believe that Sharon would never have repeated in the West Bank the kind of withdrawal that he had implemented in the Gaza Strip. According to a close confidant of Sharon:

People don’t realize how hard it was for Sharon to decide on the disengagement. It was a sober decision for him, taken with open eyes, after weighing the risks and the benefits. What was a common denominator between Rabin and Sharon was that both believed that the radical move they had taken would give Israel a long period of relative calm. Sharon believed that cutting this branch of the settlements in Gaza—which was an open wound all the time for Israel—would make possible something much more important: a generation of calm. But Rabin and Sharon were wrong, both disappeared before they could fulfill their vision. This was the danger in what

they did. A leader identifies a certain policy with himself and doesn’t understand that, at a certain point, he will not be there and the situation will be altered. Arik [Ariel] never dreamed he would not be able to complete what he wanted to achieve. I’m convinced that Gaza would have been the last unilateral withdrawal by Sharon. He reached an understanding with the Bush Administration and the leaders of the European community that there would be no additional unilateral withdrawals. The next phase would have been negotiations over comprehensive peace. In theory it could have happened. We could have reached a period of stability. Then came Ehud Olmert who, within three months, pulled the rug from under Sharon’s vision. If Sharon could wake up and hear what Olmert said during the elections, he would have had another stroke.

Other confidants of Sharon are not as categorical. Some argue that Sharon, a person with a history of unilateralism, might have opted for a West Bank withdrawal. It is impossible to know for certain what Sharon would have done, for if he proved anything it was that his pragmatism at times could trump his convictions. He had an ability, even after having the wrong first impression, to adjust his view and sense important trends in Israeli public opinion and changes in U.S. foreign policy, and to understand his political and personal constraints. Once Sharon

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<sup>57</sup> In a speech to the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies on March 22, 2006, Kadima Party candidate Othniel Schneller articulated Kadima’s platform on Jerusalem. Schneller said, “Some of the neighborhoods of Jerusalem...are not part of historical Jerusalem and therefore we make a clear and sharp distinction between them.” He cited Kafr Akab, A-Ram, Shuafat, Hizme, Abu Dis, A-Zayim, and A-Tur as neighborhoods over which Israel would relinquish control. See Etgar Lefkovits, “Schneller offers Palestinians a Jerusalem capital,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 23, 2006, p. 1, available at < <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1139395659661>>.

grasped these trends and the opportunities that they presented, he could go in almost any direction.

There were ominous signs that Gaza Disengagement, which many felt had gone better than expected, had incubated a new and severe problem. In Palestinian Legislative Council elections on January 25, 2006, Hamas won a clear victory, a development that came as an unwelcome surprise to the United States and Israel. For the Bush Administration, the Hamas rout of Fatah was a failure of Bush's campaign for democracy in the Middle East and negated his argument that democracy was the antidote to terrorism. For Israel, Hamas' ascent to power presented a unique dilemma: should Israel cooperate with a Hamas-led government, thus legitimizing it, or isolate that government, to engineer its collapse, but thereby risk heightened violence? The Olmert government chose the latter option. Meanwhile, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza had failed to stop the flood of Qassam rockets launched from Gaza against Israeli towns within Israel proper.

Olmert nonetheless began his tenure by devising "Realignment," a scheme to evacuate most of the West Bank unilaterally in return for recognition by the United States that settlement blocs around Jerusalem (Ma'ale Adumim), near Bethlehem (Gush Etzion), and in the northern West Bank (Ariel) were a legitimate part of Israel. Unlike Sharon, for whom Gaza Disengagement was an election after-thought, Olmert campaigned on the issue of "Realignment," presenting his plan to the voters for their approval. Also unlike Sharon, who won two elections in a row in

2001 and 2003, Olmert failed to generate the same level of enthusiasm as Sharon. Olmert was elected prime minister on March 28, 2006 with just 29 seats in the 120 seat Knesset compared to the 38 that Sharon had won leading Likud in 2003. As a result, Olmert formed a weak coalition government.

Olmert was also different from Sharon in the manner that he conducted relations with the United States. As a general rule, Sharon was reluctant to come to Washington DC—it often took prodding from Weissglas for him to make the trip. Not so with Olmert. One of his first questions to his staff after being elected was when he would fly to the United States. Olmert arrived in Washington in late May 2006, just three weeks after assembling his coalition government.

In preparation for Olmert's visit, the Bush Administration was forced to decide how it would react to "Realignment." One option was endorsement without tangible support: "cold support." This would expend little political capital, cause few consequences for U.S. relations with the European Union countries and the Arab world, both of which were unlikely to look favorably on another unilateral Israeli withdrawal. In addition, "cold support" would allow the United States to withhold much of the diplomatic energy and financial resources that Olmert was seeking.

The difficulty for the United States was that there were no other ideas on the table for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which made endorsing "Realignment" an attractive option. As one Bush official noted: "If, under the president's watch, Israel would withdraw from 90-plus percent of the [West Bank]

territory, it would not be a minor achievement for the president.” Nevertheless, “cold support” became the U.S. policy response to the latest unilateral initiative from Israel, and the United States made no commitment regarding contribution or assistance for “Re-alignment.” Olmert presented his plan to the United States Congress on May 24, 2006, receiving the usual enthusiastic applause, but he returned home almost empty handed.

### THE END OF AN ERA

Olmert’s visit to Washington in May 2006 was Weissglas’ farewell. It was his last official visit and it signaled the end of the backchannel mechanism that Sharon had established. Bush Administration officials had grown used to the backchannel and felt that it provided considerable value to have one Israeli contact to whom they could address all their concerns.

Olmert understood Sharon’s basic approach to relations with Bush, but wanted to do it

his way. Like Sharon, Olmert worked hard to portray himself to Bush as a strong leader and he was careful to avoid public disagreements with Bush or Rice. To ensure that a backchannel continued to function, Olmert passed the “American account” from Weissglas to the new Chief of Staff, Yoram Turbovich.<sup>58</sup> On the American side, Abrams, who had been promoted to Deputy National Security Advisor in Bush’s second term, remained the key point of contact. But the Olmert backchannel, because of the prime minister’s political weakness, was not as concentrated as the one operated by Sharon. While Sharon could marginalize his foreign ministers, Olmert had to allow Livni, the new Kadima foreign minister, to be more active and to participate in the daily, high-level and sensitive communication between the United States and Israel. The effect was to bring the State Department and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs into the game, diluting the usefulness of the backchannel, which had functioned effectively in part because it had excluded these players.

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<sup>58</sup> Following Dov Weissglas’ departure, the title of the position was changed from Chief of the Prime Minister’s Bureau to Chief of Staff.







## CONCLUSION

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On June 25, 2006, Hamas terrorists emerged from a tunnel they had dug that crossed into Israel from the Gaza Strip and attacked an IDF position, killing two soldiers and kidnapping one, Gilad Shalit. Seventeen days later, a Hizballah squad waged a cross-border attack against an Israeli patrol along the Lebanese border, killing eight soldiers, and kidnapping two, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. Israel was shocked by the two attacks, partly because they were launched from two territories from which Israel had unilaterally withdrawn in recent years.

The Israeli government felt compelled to respond forcefully to the kidnappings. The IDF reentered the Gaza Strip. By August 2006, the first anniversary of Israel's withdrawal, Israeli soldiers were again patrolling the streets of Gaza. Israel left Gaza, but Gaza never left Israel.

On the Lebanon front, the Israeli cabinet initiated a full-scale war, starting with a massive air bombing campaign and ending with a limited ground invasion. Expectations in Israel were for a rapid, decisive victory over

Hizballah. This never transpired. Instead, Lebanon suffered through 33 days of bombings and Israel was plagued with rocket attacks on its northern cities.

Thousands of Lebanese civilians and numerous Israeli civilians were victims of the fighting, but within Israel, there was another casualty. Israel went into a soul-searching, finger-pointing period, reexamining not only its military performance, but also its basic strategic assumptions. One victim was the idea of unilateralism. Olmert had campaigned for election on his "Realignment" plan, believing it would strengthen Israel's security and solidify a new, more enduring *status quo*. But public attention was on the crisis in Lebanon, and while the attacks from Gaza wounded his "Realignment" plan, the war in Lebanon buried it. Its fatal flaw was now broadly recognized: unilateral withdrawals left vacuums that were filled by terrorist organizations bent on continuing the conflict across Israel's new borders.

The relationship between the Israeli and American governments has always been affected by the political strength of each coun-

try's leaders. In the wake of the Lebanon war, Olmert has been weakened, and his political survival is in doubt. Even more important is the fact that the war emptied Olmert's government's political agenda, leaving no other plan on the horizon.

Judging by previous experiences, every vacuum in the Arab-Israeli conflict is short lived. Sooner or later, if the vacuum is not filled by political initiatives, it will be filled by violence. The events of the summer were a test, and the results revealed that the current problems Israel encounters in the region are too severe to be resolved solely by Israeli action. In the end, unilateralism has shown itself to be more a diversion than a solution to Israel's security needs.

The events of the summer of 2006 also highlighted flaws in the way Sharon had used the mechanism that he had established with the Bush Administration. The scope of the issues addressed was too narrow and while Sharon focused on securing victories on the Palestinian front, important bilateral issues

were neglected and key strategic issues were overlooked. Most importantly, while Sharon was using the mechanism to address Israel's concerns relating to the Roadmap and Gaza Disengagement, Iran was arming Hizballah with an arsenal of rockets and pursuing its nuclear program. The mechanism, therefore, was a missed opportunity for Israel and the United States to address the most pressing strategic threat facing both countries: Iran.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its regional ramifications, is one of the most complex challenges in the world. Sharon's and Olmert's attempts to find a new answer, unilateralism, brought little respite, less than traditional peacemaking, and even the much-criticized Oslo process had done. The success period of Gaza Disengagement can be measured in months, Oslo, for all its failings, in years. While Sharon and Bush tried to replace what they saw as defeatist, timid thinking with bold action, in the end, a solution still eludes Israel, the United States and the Middle East.





## THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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The Saban Center for Middle East Policy was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, is the Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director of Research. Joining them is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers in the Middle East. They include Tamara Cofman Wittes, a specialist on political reform in the Arab world who directs the Arab Development and Democracy Program; Bruce Riedel, a former senior CIA analyst and operations officer, and Senior Director at the National Security Council, who is a specialist on Syria and Lebanon; Shibley Telhami,

who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University; Steven Heydemann, a specialist on Middle East democratization issues from Georgetown University; and Ammar Abdulhamid, a Syrian dissident and specialist on Syrian politics. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings, led by Carlos Pascual, its Director and a Brookings vice president.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Persian Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state-sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, in particular in Syria and Lebanon, and the methods required to promote democratization.

The center also houses the ongoing Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, which is directed by Stephen Grand. The project focuses on analyzing the problems in the relationship between the United States and Muslim states and communities around the globe, with the objective of developing effective policy responses. The Islamic World Project's activities includes a task force of experts, a global conference series bringing together American and Muslim world leaders, a visiting fellows program for specialists from the Islamic world, initiatives in science and the arts, and a monograph and book series.





THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., NW  
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