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Israeli Politics and the Occupied Territories: What's Ahead in 2004

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Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has proposed a plan for separation between Israel and the Occupied Territories that, while not new to the Israeli political discourse, is a novel one for a right-wing Israeli politician to support. The late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had been perhaps the strongest advocate for a barrier solution as a supplement to peace talks, but he was a member of the Labor Party. Right-wing governments have traditionally been reluctant to adopt a barrier that would serve as a *de facto* border, because it would almost certainly require some settlements to be abandoned. The National Union and the religious bloc, as well as the settlers themselves, oppose such an action. Prime Minister Netanyahu was compelled to oppose a fence during his administration because his own government relied on the support of the settlers.¹

Traditional Israeli conservative politics on the one hand, and strong public support for a fence on the other, have left Sharon between a rock and a hard place. David Makovsky² cites a Steinmetz Center study from October 2003 which indicates public support for a fence was at 83% at the time. Further, 2003 saw a fundamental shift as the majority of Israelis expressed a willingness to abandon "all but the largest settlement blocs", and to withdraw from the occupied territories even if settlements would have to be abandoned.

Sharon's plan - calling for a withdrawal from all Gaza settlements and four settlements in the West Bank - appeals to a broad base of public opinion. It also plays to the worst political fears of two of his three coalition partners - the National Religious Party and the National Union. Both parties have very strong ideological commitments to the settlements, and the National Union has stated that if Sharon's plan is implemented, it will leave the governing coalition. This would leave Sharon's government with only the slimmest of majorities - 61 members of a 120-member Knesset. If the National Religious Party were to leave as well, this would leave the government with only 55 Members of the Knesset (MKs). Were the government to fail in finding a new coalition partner or partners, this would then raise the very real chance that it would fail a confidence vote. This would, in theory, lead to the fall of the government - though under the Israeli system, Sharon's administration could stay in power as an interim government for some months.

The future of Israeli political life, then, is currently in the making. If we want to examine what

may happen in Israeli politics over the next months, it is essential to ask the question: What will be the result of Sharon's Gaza plan?

Sharon recently announced that there would be a non-binding referendum of Likud party members on the issue, and that this would inform cabinet deliberations. This can be viewed from a few perspectives: It's possible Sharon is hoping his referendum will be supported on a large scale, thus showing the NRP and National Union that there would be a hefty political cost to opposing the plan. Sharon could also simply be trying to delay having to make a decision on the Gaza plan, perhaps to build support in the parties or public. Sharon could also be hoping that the referendum results will be ambiguous enough for him to say there isn't enough public support to implement his plan, thus saving his coalition – but that's very unlikely. Ehud Olmert has stated that Sharon has “crossed the Rubicon”³, and that the plan will probably be implemented in June or July.

If the plan is, in fact, implemented, and the National Union follows through on its promise to leave the government while the NRP stays, then we need anticipate no fundamental changes in the structure of the coalition. 61 MKs is still a majority, and so long as they all observe coalition discipline, there would be no threat from no-confidence votes. However, the NRP would become an absolutely pivotal participant in the government. As would Shinui, for that matter – but Shinui lacks a strong ideological commitment to the settlements, and has been firmly allied with Sharon and Likud on the issue of disengagement. So, the NRP would gain a very strong voice, disproportionate with its small number of MKs. The most probable reason for it to remain in the coalition after the National Union left might be to advance its domestic social agenda⁴.

This does not seem likely, however. National Religious Party MKs, along with National Union MKs, have abstained on no-confidence motions, and the National Religious Party at one point mentioned it would consider leaving the coalition. Further, noted Israel scholar and political analyst Don Peretz⁵ explains that the reason more parties from the religious bloc aren't in the governing coalition in the first place is because there simply isn't the money available for the social programs religious parties lobby for.

So, what if the National Religious Party leaves as well? Likud will find itself badly in need of new coalition partners – for a total of at least six seats. It is not likely that the Arab parties would be invited to join the governing coalition – there's never been an Arab cabinet member, and as

pivotal coalition members the Arab parties would certainly expect cabinet seats. Likud won't be willing to make history in this way.

Shas could bring 11 seats to the table – but they're a religious party with a similar social agenda to the NRP, which the government can't afford. That said, they have a great deal more flexibility in terms of willingness to give up land for peace. As one of the parties that has been filing no-confidence motions against the current government, it seems unlikely they would wish to join it. Further, Shinui has expressed an unwillingness to share power with Shas – but then again, the aggressively secular Shinui was originally unwilling to be in a government with the National Religious Party.

United Torah Judaism has only five seats, and a strong commitment to the settlements – in fact, it isn't even particularly interested in the peace process. It's not a likely new coalition member. Meretz could bring six seats to the governing coalition, if it were to join – but Meretz has aligned itself fairly closely with the Arab parties, filing a no-confidence motion over a government plan to transfer towns with Arab majorities in Israel to Palestinian Authority control.

This leaves the main opposition party, Labor. Under its old leadership with Mitzna, it had publicly stated it wouldn't enter into a government with Likud – which isn't to say it might not have joined a coalition anyway, campaign promises being what they are, but this did at least express a strong degree of opposition to power sharing. However, the party under Mitzna fared poorly, garnering only 19 Knesset seats in the last election, and Mitzna resigned shortly thereafter. Labor under Shimon Peres hasn't expressed an ironclad commitment to avoiding power-sharing with the Sharon government, and they have more than enough seats to make up for the loss of the National Union and NRP. They're probably the likeliest party Likud would reach out to, if their coalition shrinks below a majority. There is a tradition of Likud and Labor forming “unity governments” in times of national crisis – one can argue that the current situation qualifies.

If Labor doesn't choose to enter into coalition with Likud, and the NRP and National Union leave – then that's it. The current government can fail a confidence vote, and if Labor can patch together a coalition, then they can put in their own PM. However, the best-case scenario for Labor with the current mix of Mks sitting is a 51-seat coalition – and that's assuming Shinui defects from Sharon's government. This means that the likeliest option, if both the NRP and National Union leave, is that Labor will join Sharon's government.

This article is necessarily highly speculative in nature. However, I believe one thing is very, very clear – the current governing coalition is not likely to remain in its current form. Sharon's promotion of disengagement has alienated half the parties in his government – if he moves forward, they're likely to leave. Once they do, Labor will probably join the government. That said- Shimon Peres has emphasized in recent interviews that he will not enter the coalition “blindly”, and that in particular he wants the fence to be a security measure, *not* a de facto border, and he is also saying that he wants the peace process to continue. With Sharon convinced that he currently lacks a “partner for peace” in the Palestinians, this could be a point of contention. At a minimum, Peres will push Sharon into some form of negotiations.

Another potential complication is the recommendation of the State Prosecutor that Ariel Sharon be indicted on corruption charges. If Sharon is indicted, he may choose or be required to either take a leave of absence or resign – the legal situation in this is unclear⁶. If Sharon should take a leave of absence, it's also unclear who would take over. Ehud Olmert as Deputy Prime Minister is the obvious choice, but a recent editorial in Ha'aretz mentioned unnamed sources who claimed some Cabinet members, including Netanyahu, would not regard Olmert as legitimate and would not attend cabinet meetings.⁷ This is an important point, because Olmert strongly supports Sharon's disengagement plan, while Netanyahu's support is tepid at best.

Notes and References:

1. David Makovsky, “How to Build A Fence”, Foreign Affairs March/April 2004
2. Ibid.
3. “Fence Route To Be Moved Closer To Green Line”, Haaretz, February 8, 2004
4. A word or two on Shinui and the National Religious Party: Shinui is essentially a moderate, centrist party that is the third-largest in the Knesset and noted for being aggressively secular, as well as strongly opposed to government corruption. This is in fact a component of the party platform, and could make remaining in the government uncomfortable if Sharon is indicted. Major aspects of the National Religious Party social platform include a strong role for religious courts and state funding of religious schools. For more information, see <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Politics/Shinui.html> and http://www.israelvotes.com/demo/platforms_mafdal.html for Shinui and the NRP, respectively.
5. Don Peretz, Rebecca Kook, Gideon Doron, “Israeli Knesset Elections 2003”, The Middle East Journal Vol. 57, Number 4
6. “Depth Charges” Ha'aretz, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=386094&contrassID>
7. “No Way Out” Ha'aretz, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/411097.html>