

The End of an Era

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon had been in office for three years by the time we first met. His policies in the West Bank and Gaza had created so much tension in the region that it had been politically almost impossible for us to meet earlier. But in early 2004 I invited Sharon to Jordan in an effort to break the stalemate in the peace process. He flew into Amman by helicopter, landing at the headquarters of the General Intelligence Department.

A man with a fearsome reputation, Sharon had served in the Haganah, the Jewish underground resistance that fought Palestinians and later became part of the Hebrew Resistance Movement against the British. He led Israeli Special Forces Unit 101, conducting clandestine raids against Arab targets, and was involved in the attack on Qibya in 1953, when scores of Palestinian civilians were killed. Sharon was infamous across the region for allowing the massacre of some eight hundred Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. No Arab will ever be able to forget the searing images of the slaughtered mothers and children of Sabra and Shatila.

Extremists will always criticize me for meeting with Israeli leaders, especially those with a history of violence like Sharon, who to most Arabs is a mass murderer and a war criminal. But leaders do not have the luxury of choosing their counterparts. I do not get to choose the Israeli prime minister. Only the Israeli people can do that. But I can choose how Jordan behaves toward its neighbors and decide how to build upon my father's legacy of peace. Although there might be

some emotional satisfaction in refusing to meet Sharon, it would be short-lived and self-defeating.

We had invited Sharon to Jordan because we felt it was essential to somehow reboot the peace process. I had strongly objected to many of his actions and policies, and I hoped to persuade him that the only way to ensure lasting security for Israel was to forge a peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. My father had interacted with Sharon when he was a minister in the Netanyahu government in the late 1990s and had passed along an insight into his character. He had told me that if Sharon committed himself to something, he would stick to it. He was a man who kept his word.

Although I did not know Sharon personally, I had benefited from the respect he held for my father, and for Jordan. As I sat opposite him in a meeting room at GID headquarters, I told him that my father had said he was a man who would keep his word. So that was how I wanted to begin the relationship, I said.

Sharon seemed shy and somewhat reserved and kept looking down as he spoke. "I care about the security of Israel," he said, "but I also care about the safety and security of Jordan."

I knew that the true national interest of Jordan, and of Israel, would be served only by reaching peace between Israel and the Palestinians. I tried to convince him of this, but by the end of the meeting, after a lengthy discussion of Israeli actions in the Occupied Territories and the need to take effective steps to create an environment conducive to the resumption of serious peace negotiations, I was quite certain that Sharon did not share my view.

Our next encounter, on March 19, was a secret meeting at his ranch in the Negev Desert. By inviting me to his personal farm, where his wife was buried, Sharon was sending me the message that he was a friend to Jordan and hoped to put old hostilities behind us. Times were very tense. The construction by Israel of the wall dividing the West Bank had begun, and the belief in the region was that the Bush administration wanted to bring about "regime change" in the Palestinian Authority and had little interest in getting the parties back to the negotiating table. All the while, Israel was building more

illegal settlements in the West Bank and consolidating its hold on the Occupied Territories. The settler population in the West Bank and East Jerusalem stood at around 265,000 at the time the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993. The number had risen to about 365,000 in 2000, and to over 400,000 in 2003. This growth was a reflection of the fact that Israel never stopped building new settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, a politically incendiary move. The building of new settlements was alarming not just because they were eating away at land that should belong to the future Palestinian state, but also because it was a clear indication that Israel was not committed to a two-state solution.

We had gone to Sharon's ranch to discuss his recent proposal to pull Israeli troops out of the Gaza Strip and some parts of the West Bank. I told him that any such move should be coordinated with the Palestinian leadership and the Egyptians, and that it should be the beginning of a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territory. It should not simply be a unilateral withdrawal by Israeli forces so as to transfer Israeli settlers from Gaza to other locations in the West Bank. I felt as though we were making some progress in building a working relationship that could ultimately help push the peace efforts forward. But in my neighborhood, appearances can be deceptive.

One of the problems with the Israeli government is that everything leaks. Although our meeting was supposed to be secret, a confidence-building measure that would allow us to discuss ways of moving toward a settlement with the Palestinians, news of the trip was leaked to the Israeli press. Shortly afterward the Israelis assassinated Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the head of Hamas, with a Cobra gunshot as he was leaving a mosque in Gaza. Nine innocent people were killed along with the blind, wheelchair-bound Yassin. The assassination of a quadriplegic in his seventies seemed heartless even by Israeli standards. I was infuriated by the murder of Yassin and knew it would open up another cycle of violence. But I was also furious because the operation had taken place so soon after my visit. The next month the Israelis assassinated Yassin's successor, Abdel Aziz

Rantisi, sparking renewed violence in the West Bank and Gaza. The Americans did not condemn either assassination and vetoed a UN resolution doing so.

Israelis often, whether on purpose or not, seem to schedule important diplomatic meetings a few days before conducting controversial operations. One recent example was the meeting between Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert in December 2008, a few days before the Gaza war started. Erdogan was furious. He felt the Israeli government was trying to create the impression that he had given his tacit consent to the Gaza attack.

The assassination of Sheikh Yassin was emblematic of the morass of Middle East conflict: one side acts rashly and the other overreacts in return. The path to peace is littered with roadside bombs. The only law that is followed is one whose logic leads to unintended consequences. After the Israelis assassinated Rantisi, Hamas had to find another leader. Who did they turn to? None other than Jordan's former guest, Khaled Meshaal.

In April 2004, I was again scheduled to meet with President Bush at the White House. I planned to push to restart the peace process and hoped that the president would take a broader view of the challenges facing our region. Before my arrival, Bush welcomed another visitor, Prime Minister Sharon. During that visit, on April 14, an exchange of letters between Bush and Sharon was made public. In the days leading up to the visit, Sharon had pressed the president to reveal America's positions on several issues and to support his unilateral disengagement in Gaza. Bush's secret assurances amounted to a major shift in American policy. In his formal letter to Sharon, Bush promised U.S. support for Israel's retention of some West Bank settlements and ruled out the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their former homes, saying that they should settle in a future Palestinian state. The U.S. administration was prejudging one of the most controversial topics in the whole peace process. Bush said:

The United States is strongly committed to Israel's security and well-being as a Jewish state. 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.

The whole Arab world exploded in anger. It was clear to me that the Bush administration intended to back Israel right or wrong, so I told the White House that I was canceling my meeting. They were stunned. Few people ever turn down a meeting with the American president, and fewer still cancel meetings that have already been scheduled. But I had to make my point. I could not condone the shift in U.S. policy implied by Bush's letter. The peace process was frozen, and despite the best efforts of the Arab states to make a new push for peace, all we were getting were one-sided pronouncements and more violence.

One month later I went to Washington to try to reverse the change in American policy and was partially successful. In our joint press conference, which reiterated the substance of letters we had exchanged before my visit, Bush reaffirmed that he would not prejudge the final status talks. I restated Jordan's position that any Israeli withdrawal should follow the parameters of the road map and lead to the creation of a Palestinian state on the basis of the 1967 borders.

In October, Yasser Arafat was flown to Paris for medical treatment after his health speedily deteriorated. He slipped into a coma and died the following month. His body was flown to Cairo, where he was given a military funeral. An Egyptian plane then took his body to the Sinai, and Jordanian military helicopters carried it from there to Ramallah for burial. The helicopter landed as a distraught crowd of mourners surged forward, desperately trying to get one last glimpse of their beloved leader. Whatever the world may have thought of

Arafat, he was a hero to the Palestinian people and his passing marked the end of an era.

Mahmoud Abbas (known as Abu Mazen) was elected president of the Palestinian National Authority the following January. For decades, Israel had claimed that Arafat was a barrier to peace. Now, with his passing, they would have one less excuse for failing to deliver on their promises. Abbas assumed the leadership of the PNA at one of the lowest points in the peace process. The challenges before him were enormous. He had to fill the vacuum left by Arafat and rebuild Palestinian institutions that had been systematically destroyed by Israel in the past few years. The new Palestinian leader also had to work to put the peace process back on track. From the day he assumed office, Abbas sought a political settlement with the Israelis on the basis of the two-state solution. But he would be sorely disappointed.

In August 2005, the Israelis unilaterally withdrew from Gaza three days earlier than announced—without adequate coordination with the Egyptians, who share a long border with Gaza, or with the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli cabinet had voted overwhelmingly in support of this move the previous February. Sharon, the former champion of the settlers, had given the order to bulldoze their buildings and remove the occupants, by force if necessary. Although the withdrawal was welcome, the manner in which it was conducted was not.

By blockading all of the Gaza Strip's entry and exit points, the Israelis had turned Gaza into a virtual prison. And when they withdrew in an uncoordinated manner, they created a security vacuum. This vacuum was soon filled by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. It was a desolate scene, with heavily armed men moving through a landscape of barbed wire and ruined buildings. There was no management of the transition and no handing over of security and other responsibilities in a coordinated manner to Palestinian institutions.

A few months later, in November, Sharon split from the Likud Party and founded a new party, which he called Kadima. His

decision followed months of political infighting with members of Likud over what was known as the “disengagement plan,” which involved the withdrawal from Gaza and the dismantlement of four settlements in the northern West Bank. Sharon was joined by key Likud members, including Tzipi Livni, who would later become foreign minister, and Ehud Olmert, the former mayor of Jerusalem, who was his deputy.

In early January 2006, Sharon suffered a stroke and fell into a coma. His duties were assumed by Olmert. It soon became clear that the old warrior would not recover, and Olmert officially became prime minister of Israel in April.

New leaders were taking over on both sides, and many in the region hoped this would lead to a fresh approach to an old conflict. Nowhere was that hope stronger than among those gearing up for the first Palestinian legislative election in a decade, which was slated for January 25, 2006. One of the parties on the ballot was Hamas, which had chosen not to take part in the 1996 legislative elections. Because of Hamas's participation, the Israeli government considered not allowing Palestinians living in East Jerusalem to vote in the election (it considers East Jerusalem to be part of Israel). But in the end, they were allowed to vote.

Many Palestinians and others in the region argued that the conditions were not right for holding elections and urged that they be delayed. But the Bush administration disagreed with this suggestion. In a question-and-answer session with the State Department Correspondents Association on January 5, Condoleezza Rice said:

I don't really believe that we can favor postponing the elections because we fear an outcome. . . . [O]ur position on Hamas has not changed. It's listed as a terrorist organization. We recognize that there's a transition here going on in Palestinian politics. And so this is an internal matter for the Palestinians. We do believe

that there should be the ability of everyone to participate—the Palestinian people to participate in the elections.

But what would the Bush administration do if Hamas won?

Many hoped and expected that Yasser Arafat's Fatah Party would win the elections. Fatah had promised the Palestinian people statehood and freedom through the Oslo process, but the long-ago-promised state was still a distant mirage and charges of corruption against Palestinian National Authority officials were rampant. Many felt that Fatah had not delivered on its promises. So when the day came for Palestinians to go to the polls, they gave Hamas a decisive win. Hamas's victory created a major problem. The U.S. government considered Hamas a terrorist organization and would have nothing to do with it. Many European countries followed suit. This in turn allowed the Israelis to freeze tax payments to the Palestinian Authority and to claim that they did not have a "partner for peace."

Americans rightly extol the benefits of democracy, but democracy manifests itself in different forms in different cultures. If conditions are not right, it can cement divisions and fuel hatred. Part of the problem with the Bush administration was its cookie-cutter approach toward the concept of exporting democracy, which basically came down to holding elections. To my mind, developing an effective democracy is a journey. Voting in the absence of a widespread acceptance of democratic values and the existence of an independent judiciary can be a disaster. Democratic institutions are strengthened by the presence of a strong, effective middle class and reputable governing bodies. It is certainly a process that is more difficult to develop under an occupation that could, and would, destroy these institutions at will.

I do not think the Bush administration fully understood conditions in the region and thus it pushed blindly for early elections wherever it could. It sometimes seemed as if the administration was just seeking a quick win to feed the never-ending twenty-four-hour news cycle. But the problems in the West Bank and Gaza were not

going to be resolved through the ballot box before the end of the Israeli occupation. If the foundations for a stable society are not in place, extremist groups will capitalize on popular frustrations to seize power. And once the radicals take control, they do not easily relinquish it.

After winning a majority of seats in the parliamentary elections, Hamas took over the government, while Fatah still retained control of the presidency and the PLO. The new Hamas government was sworn in in March 2006. The United States and EU countries refused to recognize the government and suspended aid to it. The situation deteriorated quickly after that, especially after militants close to Hamas killed two Israeli soldiers and captured another, Gilad Shalit, during a raid into Israel from Gaza. Israel reacted by invading Gaza in June.

Almost three weeks before the invasion of Gaza, I expressed alarm at the deteriorating situation in the West Bank, Gaza, and Iraq, as well as the growing dispute between Iran and the United States. The likelihood of a new conflict appeared high to me. In a graduation speech at Mu'ta University on June 7, I warned of the risk posed by both state actors and nonstate groups seeking to ignite conflict and spoke about the devastating consequences of Iranian expansionist policies in our region. I normally address domestic issues in such speeches, but the enormity of the looming threats prompted me to emphasize these concerns instead.

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah fighters crossed into Israel, killing eight Israeli soldiers and capturing two others. In response, Israel launched an all-out invasion of Lebanon and Hezbollah fired rockets at Israeli border towns. I watched on television as the Israeli army attacked cities and villages in South Lebanon and bombed power stations across the country as well as Beirut's airport, closing that city's lifeline to the outside world. Hezbollah fighters were in the south. They were not going to escape via the airport, nor were they going to fly in more men and military supplies. Closing the airport hurt the civilian population.

I condemned the war. I had seen enough suffering in our region to know that war brings nothing but destruction. Israel's security will

be guaranteed only by coming to terms with its neighbors, not by more wars and military action.

The Israeli planes targeted not only power plants but also waterworks, roads, bridges, and other civilian infrastructure. Over the last few years Lebanese expatriates of all backgrounds had come back to the country and the economy was booming. And now the Israelis were systematically destroying Lebanon's economy and infrastructure. This was a terrible act of collective punishment, inflicting pain on the entire country in retaliation for the actions of one group.

Although throughout history there have been examples of states targeting civilians to break the will of the enemy, that is not a decision to be proud of. It is dangerously easy in wartime to demonize the enemy, which can lead to the killing of civilians, women, and children in large numbers. But any leader, whether a platoon commander, a general, or a head of state, has a moral obligation to distinguish between civilians and combatants. And Olmert chose not to do this.

Satellite stations across the Arab world filled their screens with pictures of civilian suffering in Beirut. Public opinion in Arab countries was strongly against the Israeli attack, and many in Jordan and across the region urged that something be done to help the hundreds of thousands of innocent Lebanese caught in the crossfire.

Our peace treaty with Israel allowed us to fly in humanitarian aid to Lebanon. A Jordanian C-130 transport plane was the first to land at Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport after Israel severely damaged its tarmac. Our military engineers helped to reopen the airport to supply planes. We then continued to send planes carrying relief supplies into Beirut airport, evacuating some Lebanese and third-country nationals stranded there.

An emergency Arab League meeting convened in Cairo on July 17 and unanimously condemned the Israeli military offensive in Lebanon. Several Arab states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, also criticized Hezbollah for "unexpected, inappropriate, and irresponsible acts." Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal said, "These acts will pull the whole region back to years ago and we simply cannot accept them." Since we suspected that Hezbollah was acting as an

Iranian proxy, we believed that its rocket attacks were a direct intervention by Iran into Arab politics. We knew that no good would come out of this increased Iranian assertiveness, but we were widely criticized in the Arab world for our stance.

The war lasted for thirty-four days. More than 1,100 Lebanese and 160 Israelis were killed, and much of Lebanon was destroyed before the fighting stopped on August 14, two days after the Security Council adopted Resolution 1701 calling for the end of hostilities. Hezbollah, which put up a strong fight against the Israeli army and was able to fire rockets deep into Israel till the last minute of the war, declared victory. The majority of public opinion in the Arab world celebrated Hezbollah and took pride in its ability to stand up to the Israeli army. For a brief period, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah became the hero of the Middle East. The celebration of Hezbollah's survival in the war against Israel as a victory was indicative of a major shift in the Arab and Muslim world. Victory now means survival, rather than defeating the Israeli army. The implications of this new dynamic are dangerous in the sense that, if the conflict persists, people are willing to support armed confrontations no matter what the cost is as long as they can survive and inflict damage on Israel. This new reality gives more credence to the belief that only peace, and not the military superiority of Israel, will ensure the safety of Israelis and all other peoples of the region.

Meanwhile, the scene in the Palestinian territories was getting more problematic. Tensions between the Fatah-led PNA and the Hamas government were on the rise. The uncomfortable cohabitation between the two groups ended in violence on June 14, 2007, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip after bloody confrontations with Fatah supporters and security forces.

A few months later, on November 27, the Bush administration made a final major push to reinvigorate the peace process by convening an international conference at the U.S. Naval Academy in

Annapolis. The road map of 2003 had brought little progress. Though it clearly identified steps to be taken by the Palestinians and Israelis, the road map was not being implemented and the two sides kept accusing one another of not fulfilling their obligations.

The United States invited forty-nine countries and international organizations to the conference in Annapolis, with the purpose of setting in motion a continuous process that would result in the establishment of a Palestinian state. Among the attendees were Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, as well as the secretary-general of the United Nations and foreign ministers of the Arab League's Arab Peace Initiative follow-up committee, which included Jordan. Also attending were representatives of the Quartet, a four-member group consisting of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations, which had been set up in Madrid in 2002 to help overcome obstacles facing the peace process.

In an address to the conference Bush said, "We meet to lay the foundation for the establishment of a new nation—a democratic Palestinian state that will live side by side with Israel in peace and security. We meet to help bring an end to the violence that has been the true enemy of the aspirations of both the Israelis and Palestinians." He said that both Israelis and the Palestinians would have to make tough choices to achieve peace and that he believed leaders on both sides were ready to tackle the major issues and move toward peace.

The conference ended with the announcement of an agreement that raised hopes for a settlement. Abbas and Olmert agreed to immediately implement their respective obligations under the road map and to form a mechanism, led by the United States, to monitor its implementation. The two sides committed to engage in vigorous, ongoing, and continuous negotiations, and to make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008.

Direct negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis followed. They tackled the final status issues of borders, Jerusalem, refugees, and security, with a view to delivering a final settlement.

The talks, which proceeded on the understanding that "nothing is agreed until all is agreed," appeared to be making some headway, especially on the essential issue of borders. The discussions were thorough and detailed, and the two sides exchanged maps and were negotiating the percentage of land to be swapped within the context of a final agreement. But the talks lost momentum in July when Olmert's authority was undermined by charges of corruption that forced him to announce his resignation.

Abbas's authority was also undermined by Hamas's electoral victory, which had opened another front. The 2006 elections had divided the Palestinian leadership, leaving Gaza under the full control of Hamas and the West Bank under Fatah's control. Gaza was in continual confrontation with Israel until Egypt succeeded in brokering a truce in June 2008. Popular pressure was mounting for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. But that would prove an extremely difficult task.

In hindsight, a Palestinian election in which Hamas took part created more problems than it solved. And, as with the Iraqi elections the previous year, sometimes the democratic process throws up surprises.