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AFTER THE ELECTION: ARIEL SHARON AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE INTIFADA

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Following his overwhelming victory in Israel's prime ministerial election, Ariel Sharon's first priority will be to put together a governing coalition. But the kind of coalition he is able to assemble will not determine the issues he will have to confront – these are a function of local, regional and international circumstances beyond his control. And it may not even have much effect on the ways in which he confronts these issues, since the same array of constraints that influenced decision making under Ehud Barak will continue to operate after Sharon takes office.

Sharon's most urgent challenge will be Palestinian violence. In the near term, it is certain that the *intifada* will continue in one form or another, and the standard by which Sharon's performance as prime minister will be judged is his response to that challenge. After all, personal insecurity was perhaps the single most important reason why so many Israeli voters turned against Barak. Indeed, Sharon's campaign as a "A Leader for Peace" succeeded primarily because most of those who voted for him interpreted the "peace" he promised to mean "peace and quiet."

But Sharon was rather vague about how he intended to secure this goal. He was clear only in his insistence that negotiations with the Palestinians not be resumed until the violence stops. This implies a rejection of the course pursued by Barak, namely, a combination of diplomacy and counter-force. Sharon may

expect that the Palestinians will simply tire of the confrontation and de-escalate without any prior political understandings (which are logically precluded by the refusal to negotiate before that happens). After all, the Palestinians are already paying a heavy price for the violence, both in terms of casualties and in terms of economic wellbeing: workers cannot get to their jobs in Israel, businessmen cannot export, import or secure the production inputs they need, and government institutions can barely pay salaries. It is therefore not inconceivable that a combination of fatigue and economic distress could cause the *intifada* to peter out. But this is unlikely to happen very quickly, and unless it does, the only logical alternative to a continuation of Barak's policy is more intense or at least more effective application of coercive counter-force, military and/or economic.

In considering this possibility, however, the new Israeli government will have to take into account the same factors that affected Israeli decision making before the election. These fall into three categories: bilateral, regional, and international.

At the bilateral level, escalation may make it possible to suppress the violence, but there is also the risk that, by causing more Palestinian casualties and economic hardship, it will provoke even more widespread popular support for and participation in attacks on Israeli targets. In other words, it may simply raise the cycle of

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violence to a higher level. Aside from further undermining the personal security of Israelis, rather than enhancing it, this will keep Palestinian workers away from the Israeli labor market, prolong the crisis in the tourism industry, and further deter foreign investors, thereby frustrating whatever plans Sharon has to revive economic growth. Protracted violence has already led at least one international agency to lower Israel's country risk rating; intensified violence could cause others to follow suit. Moreover, escalation may further undermine the authority of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and perhaps even cause it to collapse. Until the government under Sharon determines that the PA is only part of the problem but no longer part of the solution, it will need to weigh carefully the advisability of actions likely to subvert the PA.

At the regional level, greater pressure risks even further deterioration in Israel's relations with the Arab world. Popular sympathy with the Palestinians has already forced Arab governments to downgrade or suspend official ties with Israel, and Saddam Hussein has already exploited the Palestinian issue to strengthen his own standing in Arab public opinion. Graphic media portrayals of the consequences of more intense Israeli counter-measures might well lead to more intense Arab sanctions against Israel, especially in Egypt and Jordan, whose proximity and formal state of peace with Israel make them most sensitive to developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. It is worth noting that the support of Arab governments thus far has largely been confined to declarations of solidarity. For the most part, they have not even fulfilled their pledges of financial assistance, a source of considerable resentment among Palestinians. This suggests that governments are still able to resist popular demands to act on behalf of the Palestinians in ways that run counter to their own national interests, particularly those affecting national security. But an upsurge in popular sympathy prompted by reports of the effects of Israeli escalation could undermine the ability of Arab governments to continue combining rhetorical belligerency with practical self-restraint.

Finally, escalation in order to suppress the violence could trigger more active international

intervention. Many of Israel's counter-measures have already drawn some measure of international criticism. Its handling of mass demonstrations and riots led to condemnations of excessive force. When the character of the *intifada* shifted and the Palestinians made greater use of deadly force, Israel's response, in the form of selected targeting of key individuals, drew charges of extra-judicial execution. And the policy of closure, as well as the refusal to transfer funds to the PA, have prompted expressions of concern by other governments and international organizations about the wellbeing of the civilian Palestinian population. Unless the new Israeli government devises forms of coercion that can secure more understanding or tolerance by the outside world, it may well find that escalation will precipitate calls for precisely the sorts of diplomatic and/or physical intervention by the international community that the Palestinians have consistently demanded and that Israel, thus far, has successfully resisted.

Thus, the next Israeli government will face many of the same dilemmas that confronted the last one in dealing with the challenge of Palestinian violence. Whether Sharon heads a National Unity Government or a narrow right-wing coalition, he will benefit from a post-election constellation of forces that gives him a broader margin of maneuver than that in which Barak had to operate. In particular, he will, at least at the outset, have the option of exercising restraint without drawing criticism from the opposition (for the "sin" of failing to act decisively) or from his own national camp (for the "sin" of combining self-restraint with diplomatic concessions).

This margin, however, will narrow quite quickly. If the violence continues and Israeli casualties mount, Sharon's promise to restore security will be put to the test. In meeting the test, he can escalate without jeopardizing the kind of peace process that, in the minds of many who supported him, was not worth preserving. But whether he can separate counter-violence from any kind of political process without jeopardizing other important Israeli interests remains to be seen.