

Ariel Sharon: an ambiguous legacy

I was saddened and somewhat taken aback to learn yesterday of the passing of Ariel Sharon, former prime minister of Israel. Why taken aback? Sharon was serving as prime minister in 2006 when he suffered a sudden and massive stroke that left him in a persistent vegetative state. At the time I was shocked: a powerful figure and sitting prime minister who had just recently orchestrated Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip seemingly by sheer force of will, and had created a new political party, Kadima, that was expected to engage in further strategic withdrawals from the West Bank. Sharon was no dove - far from it - but his hawkish credentials gave him the potential to sell steps designed to strengthen Israel's security to a deeply skeptical Israeli right flank. And now he was in a coma.

And then, over time, he faded from public view and the public mind, and Israel's policies toward the Palestinians settled back into a tragically predictable pattern of provocation and retaliation; the bold figure who might have created a new paradigm was gone from the scene. Sharon remained in a coma for the past eight years - who even remembered he was alive when news of his death came out? This is why I was taken aback - in every sense he seemed like a figure that belonged to the past.

He was elected prime minister in February 2001, seven months before Aimée and I went to spend a year living in Israel and shortly after his highly provocative visit to the Temple Mount that many credit with instigating the Second Intifada. Aimée and I - and our newborn baby - lived in Jerusalem experiencing the effects of that Intifada: the constant bombings, vicious suicide attacks, Israelis scared to walk the streets or sit in cafés, the retaliatory helicopter strikes, the incursion into Jenin and other West Bank cities. Life in Israel had descended into a free for all of violence and retribution over which Ariel Sharon grimly presided. Aimée and I were frankly relieved and guilty when we finally left Israel in June of 2002 - having made sure the whole time that we never ate in a restaurant, visited the market, or rode the buses.

Yet things seemed to be improving at the point when Sharon suffered his stroke. Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip was a difficult but positive step and Sharon alone had the authority and credibility to engineer further withdrawals that could have rewritten the geographic and political map in Israel. After Sharon founded Kadima, Benjamin Netanyahu took over leadership of Likud on a more hawkish and less conciliatory platform, and has presided over the current stalemate since 2009.

Sharon's fierce relentlessness in defense of the State of Israel - a state whose birth he fought for ruthlessly in the Battle of Jerusalem and the War of Independence - made him a polarizing figure, but his boldness and vision gave him a stature that no current politician in the country can hope to match. For better or for worse, Israel lives with the with aftereffects of all that he did while he lived - and all that he might have done had he not been stricken at such a critical moment. The overall sum of his legacy for the State of Israel and the Jewish people is still being played out and has not yet been fully written: may it ultimately prove to be for a blessing.

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