

What the Likud vote reveals about Israel's real intentions

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Consider, if you will, the following hypothetical scenario:

The central leadership of Yasser Arafat's Fateh meets to consider and vote on a resolution declaring the party's refusal to recognise Israel. Arafat speaks against the proposal, but it is carried overwhelmingly.

What would be the reaction by the United States? Would the *New York Post* dismiss the vote as "largely irrelevant"? Would the White House praise Arafat as the guarantor of a democratic road to a negotiated settlement, whose own views are more important than those of a few party hotheads—a man who has repeatedly affirmed his own recognition of Israel and who, in any case, is the leader of a government that is committed to securing peace with its neighbour?

Utterly implausible, isn't it? Instead, the media would point an accusing finger at Arafat. His weasel words of peaceful intent would be pronounced worthless and he would be condemned as having had secret designs on the destruction of Israel all along.

Now consider the reaction to the May 12 vote by the central committee of Israel's ruling party, Likud rejecting the idea of a Palestinian state and declaring this to be an abiding principle of the party.

Responding to the vote, the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said it was a slap in the face for President Bush. "This just shows that the war being waged by Israel against the Palestinians is not a war against what they call terror, it's really their war to maintain the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza."

Arafat declared, "This is the destruction of the Oslo Accords, which they have signed."

On Capitol Hill, however, calm reigned. The Likud vote was routinely dismissed as nothing more than grandstanding for the benefit of a hardline minority within Likud on the part of Sharon's challenger for party leadership, Binyamin Netanyahu, who wishes to state his claim as premier following elections due next summer.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said that President George W. Bush "continues to believe that the best route to peace is through the creation of the state of Palestine and side-by-side security with Israel... Beyond that, I don't comment on internal domestic politics. Every nation has its share of internal domestic politics."

Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters en route to a NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Iceland, "We would rather not have seen the vote." He said that he had discussed the Likud vote with Sharon, "and of course he reaffirmed to me that he

remains committed to moving forward to achieve that vision that I think most people have of a Palestinian state. I don't think it changes Prime Minister Sharon's basic thinking about this subject, where he was inclined to move forward to a Palestinian state at some point in the future."

The same view was articulated in Europe. Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique said a Palestinian state remained "the only solution" to the Middle East conflict, while a spokesman for the European Commission said the Likud vote reflected "the position of a political party. What concerns us is the position of the Israeli government."

The vote was indeed dismissed as "largely irrelevant" by the *New York Post*, which went on to argue, "That's because Prime Minister Ariel Sharon insists that, notwithstanding the ballot, 'I will continue to lead Israel according to the considerations that have always guided me.'"

Clearly we are meant to take on good faith that Sharon's considerations are different from those articulated by his party's central leadership, the position insisted on by every major spokesman for the Bush administration.

One would imagine from such a presentation that Sharon had just fought a major struggle against a hardline opposition to insist on the right of the Palestinians to their own state. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather Netanyahu and Sharon had competed against each other over who had the better claim to be the most intransigent opponent of the Palestinians.

The vote for Netanyahu's resolution was an unambiguous declaration that Likud, or at least the dominant voices within the party, will never accept the creation of a Palestinian state. In his speech, Netanyahu denounced Sharon for ending his military attacks on West Bank towns prematurely and for permitting Arafat to walk free from his Ramallah compound. He said that he "refused to accept the inane pronouncement that terrorism cannot be solved through military methods... We have to completely crush Arafat's regime and remove him from the scene".

He insisted, "This must be clear—there will not be a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River because that would be a deadly threat to Israel." The Palestinians may be granted "full self-rule", but not statehood, because, "A state has full control over its borders" and its airspace.

In his reply, Sharon said of Netanyahu that there have already been prime ministers, "who warmly, naively perhaps, shook Arafat's hand." He, Sharon, had not done so. He did not oppose

the proposal to reject Palestinian statehood, but only asked that no position be put that would complicate his efforts to conceal his government's intentions. "Any decision taken today on the final agreement is dangerous to the state of Israel and will only intensify the pressures on us," he warned. "We are not dealing today with the Palestinian state, the issue is not on the agenda. What we are dealing with today is with eradicating terror and fighting the PNA's terrorist infrastructures. The IDF soldiers, the security forces, and the entire Israeli people are united today in their strive to eradicate terror. This is not the time for discussions on irrelevant issues."

The discussion on a Palestinian state was irrelevant, as far as Sharon is concerned, because there will never be one. For months he has led a military campaign that has led to the loss of around 2,200 Palestinian lives. He has presided over the assassination of most of the leading personnel of the PA, aside from Arafat, gutted the PA's Ramallah headquarters, destroyed its written and computer records on education, transport, land ownership and history, razed schools, radio stations and newspaper offices and caused millions of dollars in damages to civilian housing. In short, everything necessary for the functioning of a state has been destroyed.

To say openly that Israel will not countenance Palestinian independence, however, would undermine the carefully cultivated myth that Israel is fighting a defensive war against an enemy that seeks its destruction, making clear that the reverse is true.

This is why Sharon objects to Netanyahu's resolution, and for no other reason. He reiterated his calls for the "total cessation of the terror, violence, and incitement" as a precondition for peace and added to this the demand for the "basic structural reform" of the PA "in all security-related, economic, legal, and social areas, along with full transparency and organisational responsibility." In short total surrender and the direct subordination of the PA to Israeli and US dictates.

This can hardly be described as an argument in favour of eventual Palestinian sovereignty. Sharon has made it clear time and again that he sees no immediate prospect of statehood for Palestinians and that he considered the proposals Arafat rejected at Camp David almost two years ago to have been an unpardonable and dangerous capitulation on the part of his predecessor, Ehud Barak. An analogy with what Sharon is now offering is the type of tribal Bantustans that existed in Apartheid South Africa, where a servile Palestinian administration would be allowed by its Israeli and US masters to police a subject population denied any social and democratic rights whatsoever.

Despite this, the tenor of the meeting was hostile in the extreme. Amongst the fascistic layers that dominate within Likud, any prospect not founded on a campaign to annihilate immediately the Palestinians is tantamount to treachery.

At one point during Sharon's speech, Netanyahu was obliged to ask his supporters to respect the prime minister and let him be heard. At its end, Sharon walked out to a chorus of booing and the CC nearly unanimously approved the resolution opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state.

According to most analysts, Netanyahu had succeeded in staking out his leadership claim in Likud. But it is wrong to attribute a

purely domestic motive to his actions.

The Bush administration may be somewhat embarrassed by such a frank declaration having been made of Likud policy regarding the Palestinians. This does not mean, however, that "Bibi" does not have many admirers and supporters within the highest echelons of Washington.

Netanyahu spent his high school years in the United States, receiving a B.Sc. in Architecture and a M.Sc. in Management Studies. He is regularly feted by leading Republicans and Democrats, particularly by Zionists and supporters of the Christian fundamentalist right. A delegation from the Zionist Organisation of America, led by president Morton Klein, praised the resolution's passing as an important step in the war on terrorism.

Aside from Washington, the other Middle Eastern player keen to dismiss the significance of the Likud vote was Israel's Labour Party, which sits in Sharon's coalition.

Shimon Peres, Sharon's foreign minister, pronounced the Likud vote as meaningless, insisting, "It's all words, words, words, empty of content." He promised, "The Labour Party will stay in the government and not exit and enter according to the decisions of the Likud central committee, which tomorrow morning can decide something else."

Peres claimed that his pledge of loyalty was justified because the government was committed to a negotiated settlement and the eventual creation of a Palestinian state in line with United Nations resolutions. The lie to such claims was given by Labour's Haim Ramon, who was equally keen to deny any practical significance to the Likud vote—but for entirely opposite reasons than those claimed by Peres. "It's not going to have any impact on the government," he said, because, "What Sharon is talking about is very virtual, and his conditions for a Palestinian state are so stiff he won't have to implement it—not a chance."

According to *Ha'aretz* newspaper, Defence minister and Labour Party chairman, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, has held secret meetings with Netanyahu to discuss the possibility of establishing a unity government after the next national elections, assuming that both head their respective parties at the time. Ben-Eliezer, who wants to be Labour's candidate, is said to be seeking a guarantee that he retains the defence portfolio if he loses and Netanyahu heads the next government.



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