

Anthony Bubalo
Israel's pragmatic hawk makes a dovish move
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The decision by the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, to leave the Likud party he helped found in 1973 seems extraordinary — like John Howard bolting from the Liberal Party to join the Greens. But, by the standards of Israeli politics, where pragmatism often trumps party sentiment, it is only remarkable.

The move is symptomatic of a broader redrawing of political boundaries in Israel that may ultimately lead to the establishment of diplomatic boundaries between Israel and a future Palestinian state.

Sharon reportedly took the final decision to establish a new political party — dubbed National Responsibility — as late as last weekend. But the move was on the cards from the moment Sharon detached himself from Likud's ideological vision by unilaterally withdrawing Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip. Faced with the prospect of another term as prime minister in which his main political opposition would come from within his own party, Sharon decided to effect his own unilateral withdrawal.

The move is risky, but Sharon believes he can count on strong support from ordinary Israelis. He has long been the most popular politician everywhere in Israel except within his own party. Indeed, the formation of National Responsibility is just one part of a wider process in which political movements are realigning themselves to reflect popular attitudes towards not only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also socio-economic issues.

On the Palestinian issue, most Israelis seem to want, in effect, left-wing — or centre-left — policies carried out by right-wing leaders.

Today a broad consensus exists around the idea of giving more territory to the Palestinians as the basis for a two-state solution. Indeed, the idea is no longer even considered particularly leftist.

At the same time, many Israelis want any further handover of territory to be undertaken by politicians who they believe will either bargain hard with the Palestinian leadership, or bypass it altogether by unilaterally separating the two populations.

In part, this has been a result of the Palestinian intifada, or uprising. On the one hand, Palestinian violence has caused many Israelis to question the value of retaining control over territory in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. On the other hand, violence and terrorism have undermined any popular trust in Palestinian intentions — and by implication, trust in leftist politicians seen to be too accommodating towards Palestinian demands.

In part, this realignment also reflects the inability of either Labour or Likud to successfully occupy the political centre without exposing deep internal ideological fissures. Labour tried and failed under former prime minister Ehud Barak. Even Sharon, the perfect embodiment of this seemingly contradictory public attitude of wanting dovish policies executed by hawkish leaders, struggled to keep Likud at the middle ground and in the end was forced to cut the party's dead weight from around him.

Sharon needs to turn this new party into a vehicle for re-election, and if early polls are right — and there is cause to be wary — he is likely to achieve this.

What will happen on the diplomatic front is less clear. The optimists argue that a newly empowered Sharon would revitalise a moribund peace process. After all, if Sharon had intended to do little more than the Gaza withdrawal he could have remained in Likud. Pessimists will point to his record, expecting not renewed negotiations but further unilateral moves that fall well short of Palestinian expectations.

Against the background of such a profoundly pragmatic political manoeuvre, however, the last word should probably go to the pragmatists.

Sharon is no convert to the peace-at-any-price camp. But, equally, he seems to recognise that it is in Israel's interests to finally set its borders with the Palestinians. And should the pragmatism in the emerging Israeli political dispensation be echoed in Palestinian legislative elections in December, the door to the resumption of negotiations may well be reopened.

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