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Ariel Sharon: Israel's Security-Maker
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Throughout his long military and political career, Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon has had a one-track mind. He has wanted the people of Israel to live normal, placid lives, without the fear (and reality) of suicide bombers, random murders, kidnappings, rocket shellings, military invasion and other violent acts.

As a soldier, when he rose through the ranks to become a general, he fought to protect his fellow countrymen from outside invaders. As a politician, whether on the back-benches of the Likud Party or in the office of Prime Minister, he supported actions he believed would strengthen Israel militarily and weaken its enemies. At all times, he focused like a lightning bolt on Israel's security. His single-mindedness about this one concern explains nearly all key decisions of his military and political career.

Despite the accolades since his collapse from a massive stroke in early January, Ariel Sharon was not a peace-maker. He never developed policies to make peace with the Palestinians. Although he paid lip-service to the Bush Administration's "Roadmap for Peace," he met none of its deadlines, undertook none of its confidence-building measures, and participated in none of its intended negotiations. His courageous withdrawal of the Israeli army and civilian settlements from the Gaza Strip last summer was done for security reasons, not to bring about peace.

Sharon acted on an insight that no previous Israeli Prime Minister had credited, namely, that peace negotiations -- even successful ones -- brought few benefits for Israel. They certainly did not bring security. The peace with Egypt was a "Cold Peace"; it brought only slight cooperation and no friendship.

The same was true for the peace with Jordan. The Oslo Peace Accords from the early 1990s turned out to be empty promises with no lasting solutions. During the same period, relationships between Israel and the Palestinians deteriorated, terrorist acts against Israelis increased, and law-and-order in the occupied territories broke down (due in part to Israeli military operations to be sure). Security actually worsened.

So rather than try to provide security through peace agreements, Prime Minister Sharon decided to act to achieve security as his primary goal. If peace came, that would be good as well. The key to security in his mind was the separation of the two parties to the conflict. Sharon did not negotiate a separation; he simply imposed one unilaterally, forcing it on both the Palestinians and his own political party.

In the Gaza Strip, Sharon simply withdrew all Israelis, both civilian and military. This left the Palestinians to fend for themselves, by themselves, in their own territory. For the West Bank, Sharon decided to build a security wall all along its borders. As the wall went up, it became clear that it constitutes a de facto border, imposed without any consultation or negotiation.

Ariel Sharon's main strength as prime minister was that he had a workable plan. It could stop the suicide bombers and, most importantly, it could be implemented because Sharon would simply impose it. It was not subject to the incessant infighting that characterizes Israeli politics and it was not dependent on approval by the Palestinians who, since the Oslo Accords of the early 1990s, have shown themselves to be unable to agree with the Israelis on anything of significance. It gave hope to a hopeless situation because it broke the logjam that had been in place since the assassination of Prime Minister Israel Rabin.

Whether the new party Sharon was forming, Qadima, can continue Sharon's plans now that his health problems have forced him out of the picture remains to be seen. Sharon's plan for after the March elections was apparently to remove the Israeli settlements on the Palestinian side of the wall and again let the Palestinians fend for themselves, by themselves, in a place where they could not reach Israeli citizens. He favored an independent Palestinian State not because it was the right thing to do, but because he believed it would bring Israel security. Only time will tell whether any of this is now achievable.