



## FUTURE OF ISRAELI POLITICS UNCERTAIN POST SHARON

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*The future of Israeli politics and the Middle East peace process was thrown into chaos last week when Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the larger-than-life leader of the Jewish state, suffered a major stroke.*

After undergoing emergency brain surgery Jan. 5, the extent of the 77-year-old prime minister's brain damage is still unknown, but he is not expected to return to office.

"He will not continue to be prime minister, but maybe he will be able to understand and to speak," said Dr. José Cohen, Sharon's chief surgeon, the New York Times reported.

Deputy Premier Ehud Olmert is acting prime minister until elections March 28.

### **Sharon's impact**

The charismatic and forceful former military leader has been prime minister since 2001, following a controversial political career spanning almost 20 years.

As minister of agriculture (1977-81), Sharon supported the policy of Jewish settlements -- military-protected "towns" -- in the Arab territories of the West Bank and Gaza, earning him the nickname "the Bulldozer."

In 1999 following an election to Israel's parliament, the Knesset, Sharon served as chairman of the conservative Likud Party, which stressed security over political engagement with the Palestinians.

In February 2005, Sharon made the surprising decision to pull the Jewish settlers out of 21 Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements, a plan that was initiated in August with little violence.

"Sharon, coming to the end of his life, coming to the end of his political time, wants to, I think, fulfill what he sees as his historic responsibility to firm up, if not finalize, the borders of the Jewish state of Israel," Martin Indyk, who dealt with Sharon frequently while serving as U.S. ambassador to Israel, told the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Sharon's critics contend that he withdrew from Gaza in order to justify Israel's refusal to engage with the Palestinians on the tougher issues such as the future of Jerusalem and the West Bank.

### **Who might replace Sharon?**

Who might replace Ariel Sharon is a question of great debate in Israel right now.

In November, Sharon left the Likud Party he founded to start a more centrist party, Kadima -- a noun in Hebrew meaning "forward or progress."

"The Likud in its present configuration cannot lead the nation to its national goals," Sharon said when he announced his decision.

One potential successor is the current acting prime minister, Ehud Olmert, once the former mayor of Jerusalem and member of Kadima.

If elected, Olmert is expected to continue Sharon's policies. According to a poll conducted last week by the Market Watch Institute, two-thirds of Israelis favor this approach, the Associated Press reported.

But Olmert lacks Sharon's charisma and military background and some regional experts believe that he does not have the political support to overcome strong opposition to further withdrawals from Palestinian areas.

Another possible outcome is that former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, now the leader of Likud, could return to power.

Netanyahu quit the government in protest of Sharon's withdrawal of Jewish settlements.

### **International Reaction**

Many in the Arab world and the international community hope that a post-Sharon Israel will begin to negotiate peace with the Palestinians as equal partners again.

"It is vitally important for any new leader of Israel to carry out a program of ending the occupation of the West Bank, leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state with full regional recognition of Israel within secure borders," Terje Roed-Larsen, the former United Nations envoy for the Middle East, told the New York Times.

### **Palestinian elections**

Palestinian elections, set for Jan. 25, also could impact the future of relations in the Middle East.

Many in the region believe that the extremist group Hamas, which advocates Israel's destruction, could come out on top.

"If extremists win power in the Palestinian elections, then that will help the Israeli extremists. Palestinian terrorist attacks have always had a large effect on the Knesset elections," Avi Primor, the former Israeli ambassador to Germany, told Salon.

*--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*  
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