Ariel Sharon: Tactical Brilliance, Strategic Disaster

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IAN LUSTICK, JAN 21 2014

Ariel Sharon was the "Zelig" of Israeli politics—the figure in the Woody Allen movie who adopts whatever outward appearance is necessary to succeed at the moment, but has no inner compass. Like Zelig in the movie, Sharon appears, in either the background or the foreground, in almost every key juncture of Israeli national life—a career that both shaped and reflected Israel's dramatic successes and its tragic failures. Look behind the public face of events at almost every major turn in Israel's political history, and you will see Ariel (Arik) Sharon.

An effective company commander in 1948, Sharon nearly died from wounds suffered in the battle of Latrun. He was subsequently picked by Moshe Dayan to help eliminate what Dayan saw as a dangerous reluctance by his officers to take risks or suffer casualties. Sharon was put in command of the notorious but, for Israelis, inspiring and secret "Unit 101." Its main function was to conduct brutal reprisal and intimidation raids in Jordanian territory against civilians as well as Jordanian soldiers. Its existence was denied for years, with the raids blamed on Jewish hot-heads and holocaust survivors living along the border who could not stand being harassed by Arab infiltrators. This pattern of action that is either secretly authorized or is authorized ex post facto became a signature element in Sharon's modus operandi, one that gave expression to a "*bitzuist*" (can-do-regardless-of –regulations) ethos within the pre-state Labor movement, and that encouraged a broader, and cynical use of public lies about Arab behavior and Israeli policies to justify useful facts on the ground.

In 1956 Sharon's career was almost ended by the same swaggering derring-do that lifted him to prominence. Ordered by Dayan to lead a diversionary parachute jump into the Mitla Pass to deceive the Egyptians by making the invasion of Sinai appear as an ordinary retaliation raid, Sharon sought to take the pass, thereby sacrificing dozens of soldiers. The tactics Sharon used in the early 1970s to subdue Gaza and settle the northeastern Sinai 1970 were unprecedentedly cruel, including summary executions and well-poisonings. But as indicated by his willingness to sacrifice the lives of his soldiers for personal glory, as evidenced in the Mitla Pass episode, his ruthlessness was not directed only toward Arabs. Although oddly ingratiating with civilians he wanted to impress, many of his fellow officers and, later, fellow cabinet ministers, were terrified of his threatening, vulgar, and abusive style that left even well-seasoned Israeli leaders shaken. It was this style more than anything that prevented him from being considered for the post of Chief of Staff, triggering his departure from the Army after his "invasion of Africa" crossing of the canal that helped shift Israel's battlefield fortunes in its 1973 war with Egypt.

After failing to gain traction with his own dovish party, Shalom Zion, Sharon joined Menachem Begin's Likud Party which took power in 1977. Begin appreciated Sharon's abilities as a "bulldozer," who could ignore or overcome bureaucratic and other legal obstacles. Sharon was appointed Agriculture Minister, head of the Israel Lands Administration, and Chairman of the Interministerial Settlement Committee. This put Sharon in charge of a massive settlement campaign to tie the West Bank to Israel permanently. Characteristically, Sharon's success in this endeavor was based on bold and effective tactical schemes with no strategic plan to exploit their success. Thus he found ways to transfer enormous amounts of putatively "state land" to exclusive Jewish use by depriving Arabs of avenues to appeal expropriations, all without formally changing Israel's legal relationship to the occupied territory. At the same time, he failed to outline a future for the country that included the masses of disenfranchised and impoverished Arabs he was insuring would remain within its borders.

The effects of the contradiction between Sharon the brilliant schemer and Sharon the strategic bungler is perhaps his

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most lasting legacy to Israel. The builder of more settlements than anyone else, he was also the destroyer of more settlements than anyone else—in Yamit and in Gaza. Imagining he could replace the PLO with gangs of criminals appointed as heads of the "Village Leagues," he witnessed the West Bank and Gaza rise up in the first intifada. In his most "Napoleonic" speech, in 1981, Sharon presented a grand strategic vision of Israel as a world power capable of extending its influence "from Mauritania to Afghanistan" and even threatening the Soviet Union. One practical result of this vision was an extremely effective but ultimately humiliating spy effort against the United States involving Jonathan Pollard and the transmittal of closely guarded US national security secrets to the Soviet Union.

But the most disastrous consequence of Sharon's strategic incompetence was the Lebanon War of 1982. With his grandiose image of Israel as a major player on the world stage justifying his actions, he used deception, intimidation, and maneuver to plunge Israel into the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. As Defense Minister he convinced most members of the cabinet that he could establish a pro-Israel Maronite regime in Beirut, eliminate the Palestinian problem for at least a generation, and keep Israeli forces out of Beirut. Instead, he pushed the army into Beirut triggering a mutiny of Israeli officers, aided and abetted the massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilla, and left Israeli soldiers to bleed in Lebanon for eighteen years. Forced from office in the war's aftermath, Sharon was banned forever from the post of Defense Minister.

But he was not banned from becoming Prime Minister. His ascension to the premiership was the result of an amazing tactical maneuver—marching through the Temple Mount (Haram el-Sharif) in Jerusalem with 1,000 policemen as a way to embarrass his rival Netanyahu into criticizing him, and thereby alienating the Likud hard core, or supporting him, thereby ruining Netanyahu's campaign to rehabilitate his reputation for statesmanship. Characteristically, the result of Sharon's tactical success was the strategic disaster of the second intifada.

Sharon was a man of huge appetites, whose objectives were never modest. His actions usually produced damaging, unintended strategic consequences that made the problems he was trying to solve seem minor by comparison. When, as Prime Minister, he became aware of the need for prudence, neither his body nor Israeli politics, both of which he had abused, could follow where he may finally have decided to lead.

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