

ISRAEL AFTER SHARON

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Wednesday night ushered in a new era in Israel's political history. As we watch and worry as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dangles between life and death, one thing is absolutely clear. Sharon's massive cerebral hemorrhage on Wednesday night spelled the end of his political career. Sharon will never return to lead the State of Israel. He will never make a full recovery.

Whatever one's views of Sharon's policies and the quality of his leadership, no Israeli can feel anything but sorrow at Sharon's abrupt demise. A nation's sudden and dramatic separation from its leader is never a good thing. It is all the more debilitating when the leader in question is as popular and powerful as Sharon.

There will come a proper time to inquire into the reports we received about Sharon's health in the three weeks that passed since the premier suffered his initial stroke. Those questions will no doubt focus on statements by his spin doctors attesting to his good health and on the media's refusal to ask hard questions about Sharon's ability to continue in office after that first stroke. But now, as we enter the post-Sharon era, those questions are beside the point. The task that now besets our political leadership and the Israeli people as a whole is to focus on the country's present challenges -- for they suffer no delay.

Without a doubt, the greatest challenge facing the State of Israel today is Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Until Wednesday night, the rumor-mill running between Jerusalem, Washington and the capital cities of Europe was full of reports that Sharon planned to order an Israeli attack against Iran's nuclear installations just before our general elections at the end of March. There was nothing new in these rumors. Similar ones have been making the rounds for over a year now. In autumn 2004 for instance, it was whispered that Sharon would order such an attack on the day of the US presidential elections in November 2004. This past spring it was claimed that Sharon would give the order during the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza and northern Samaria. And now, for the past two months or so, rumors have circulated that Sharon was planning a strike to destroy Iran's nuclear installations just ahead of the elections on

March 28.

There can be no room for doubt. The need to conduct a military strike against Iran's nuclear program increases with each passing day. The threat that Iran's nuclear weapons program constitutes for Israel is the most egregious example since the Holocaust of what happens when states and societies where anti-Semitism is of a genocidal nature are allowed to acquire the means to attack the Jews.

Israel's experience, like the experience of the Jewish people throughout its history, has taught that such anti-Semites seek out opportunities to use their acquired means to kill Jews. And now, against the increasingly tangible threat that Iran will soon acquire nuclear capabilities, Israel finds itself in an election season marked by political uncertainty and instability.

Even in the absence of domestic political chaos, any Israeli plan to attack Iran's nuclear facilities is today hampered by two things. First, the anti-Semitism that is endemic in the Iranian regime is equally endemic throughout the entire Muslim and Arab world. Were Iran to carry out tomorrow President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's promise to complete Hitler's work, such an act would no doubt be met with glee throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

As well, Iran has been able to advance its nuclear weapons program in large part due to the vast increase in anti-Semitic sentiments throughout the Western world. Over the past five years, the notion that there is something acceptable about murdering Jews and seeking to destroy Israel has met with increasing acceptance among large swathes of European society and the ranks of the international Left. Today, as Israel enters the post-Sharon era, it is hindered by unprecedented diplomatic weakness, largely as a result of the prevalence of Western anti-Semitism and its concomitant demand that Israel do all it can to appease its enemies.

For Israel to be capable of carrying out an attack against Iran's nuclear installations it will need to receive US and NATO backing for the move. The majority of international security analysts agree that Israeli fighter bombers en route to Iran will need to fly over Iraqi airspace and may even need to refuel in Iraq. Turkish bases may also be necessary. Given this, Israel is today in dire need of leadership capable of handling some of the most sensitive and monumental diplomacy in its history - even if such leadership were only able to convince others to carry out the attacks in our place.

The genocidal anti-Semitism that lies at the root of Iran's quest to destroy Israel with nuclear weapons is also the source of Palestinian-led terror war against Israel. Yet, unlike the case of Iran, whose wherewithal to match its desire to destroy Israel with actual military capabilities has been

uninfluenced by Israeli actions, the Palestinians' terror capabilities have been vastly expanded as a direct result of Israeli policies.

Today, as the Palestinian Authority has ceased to operate in any coherent manner; as the Egyptian border with Gaza has been open for terror traffic for three months; and as Hamas has emerged as the most prevalent force in Palestinian politics and society, it is impossible to deny that Sharon's decision to withdraw Israeli forces from Gaza and northern Samaria has vastly empowered Palestinian terrorists. Today the Gaza Strip has become one of the most active and dangerous bases for jihadi terrorism in the world.

And yet, the rapid transformation of Gaza into the most active terror base in the Arab world has not led to calls by the international community, led by Washington for Israel to take the military measures necessary to destroy the emerging threat. To the contrary: The international community, led by the Bush Administration, has greeted Gaza's mutation into what Palestinians refer to as a new Somalia, and what for Israelis and Westerners in general is more comparable to Taliban ruled Afghanistan, with ever more strident demands for continued Israeli appeasement of Palestinian terrorists. The latest testimony to Israel's unprecedented diplomatic weakness in Washington came with President George W. Bush's demand this week that Israel allow Arab residents of Jerusalem to vote in the upcoming Palestinian elections - elections in which Hamas is expected to receive a plurality, if not a majority of votes.

Amid the threat now constituted by Gaza and the rising chaos in Palestinian society generally, three weeks before the Palestinian elections Israel's defense and diplomatic establishments have no answers to give. Israel has no coherent policy to speak of for dealing with the acquisition of Strella anti-aircraft missiles or Katyusha missiles by Palestinian terrorists in Gaza. It has no policy for contending with the fact that Al Qaida has now become an actor in the Palestinian areas and in south Lebanon. It has no effective policy for dealing with the repeated attacks against its vital infrastructures in Ashkelon or with assumption that the Palestinians will soon transfer their newfound capabilities from Gaza to Judea and Samaria. Israel's security brass has no policy for contending with the manifest links between the Iranian regime and Palestinian terror groups.

Our leadership's befuddlement was perhaps most sharply manifested on Wednesday by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, who in a public statement laid out Israel's conditions for opening a dialogue with Hamas.

Mofaz's statement was not merely ill-advised. It was completely irrational. Hamas, like the Iranian ayatollahs, is a terror group totally committed to the eradication of Israel. This fact was brought home clearly in an Egyptian television interview given by Mariam Farahat, aka Umm Nidal, the mother

of three dead Hamas terrorists on December 21. Farahat is considered a moderate Hamas member and is a Hamas candidate in the Palestinian elections.

In a transcript published by MEMRI, Farahat, who justified the murder of all Israelis everywhere as a legitimate means of jihad, spelled out what "peace" with the Jews means for Hamas. For her, "Peace means the liberation of all of Palestine, from the [Jordan] river to the [Mediterranean] Sea. When this is accomplished - if they want peace, we will be ready. They may live under the banner of the Islamic state. That is the future of Palestine that we are striving towards."

This is Israel's current reality. Our main security challenge on all fronts is to destroy our enemies' ability to match their genocidal anti-Semitism with the means to kill us. And the carrying out of this task can only be accomplished by a leadership that truly understands that we are not to blame for our enemies' hatred and that we can do nothing to mitigate it.

The fact that Arab and Islamic anti-Semitism is met by and large by indifference from the West, which itself is suffering from a milder yet increasingly widespread form of Jew hatred, makes clear the third challenge facing Israel today: ensuring our economic independence. In the history of nations, there has scarcely been a case where the side with the weaker economy prevailed over its enemy in a war of attrition. Israel must ensure its economic vitality and independence in order to guarantee that our defense industries can continue to operate and that our military forces are properly equipped and trained. As well, in light of the rampant anti-Semitism in Western Europe, Israel must be capable of absorbing waves of Jewish immigration from Europe.

Today Israel is in the midst of a painful but successful process of economic liberalization and growth. The political instability that Sharon's departure has induced can threaten this process which is so vital to the future of the country.

In light of the critical challenges that Israel faces today, our current political instability places us in a difficult position. The fact of the matter is that Sharon's Kadima party without Sharon is nothing more than a patchwork of politicians who diverge on so many issues it is impossible to see it fashioning coherent policies. This is a cause for alarm. As well, the fractiousness of the nationalist camp that has been manifested by the Likud ministers' unjustifiable opposition to Binyamin Netanyahu's party leadership, is an additional cause for Israeli weakness at this critical juncture.

One of Sharon's greatest strengths was his ability to form coalitions of people from disparate backgrounds and political camps and move them

forward to achieve goals that appeared impossible to attain. Now, with Sharon no longer leading the country, our political leaders must find a way to act in a similar manner. The future of the state depends on their success.