

Israel's unsettling leader

Arvey Morris examines whether the country's prime minister has turned his back on his past support for settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, or is simply playing a waiting game under pressure from George W. Bush for peace with the Palestinians

Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, this week publicly committed himself to President George Bush's vision of a two-state solution to his country's conflict with the Palestinians. By doing so, he appeared to have undergone a remarkable political transformation for a man once inextricably linked with rightwing dreams of Greater Israel.

In his statement in the Jordanian Red Sea resort of Aqaba, standing alongside Mahmoud Abbas, his Palestinian counterpart, and Mr Bush, Mr Sharon pledged to implement the US-backed "road map" for the region. This envisages the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005 in territories currently occupied by Israel.

Israelis, whether they welcome or oppose the diplomatic course he has followed, have been stunned to watch the godfather of the settlement movement adopt this stance. It would almost certainly involve the removal of some of the Jewish communities that have been implanted in the West Bank and Gaza since they were captured in the 1967 Middle East war. Yet Mr Sharon has spent much of his career advancing the cause of Israeli expansion by using a string of ministerial posts to sponsor settlements.

His statement this week went beyond his previous vague talk of the "painful concessions" he was prepared to undertake in return for peace. Israelis in general have been taken aback – and the right wing has been appalled – by Mr Sharon's use of the word "occupation" to describe Israel's presence in the territories. Some of those who believed that he was incapable of flexibility on the issue say they are now prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. A common refrain among Israeli leftwingers is that, while once they swore they would leave the country if he came to power, they now think he may be the best man to bring the conflict to an end.

Some of those close to Mr Sharon

says it simply shows that he is adapting to his role as leader of the country. Faced with the wider project of ending the conflict, he is simply adopting the most logical and pragmatic course. "As a soldier, he dedicated himself single-mindedly to the task in hand to the exclusion of everything else and it was the same when he was minister of agriculture and defence. Now he is prime minister, his project is to address the overall problem facing the country," says one Israeli official.

Optimists on the left are prepared to accept that Mr Sharon is sincere. The prime minister is 75, so this will proba-

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bly be his final term in office. They think he wants to be remembered for forging a lasting peace rather than as a confrontationist whose reputation once seemed to have been irrevocably scarred by the Lebanon war and his indirect responsibility for the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Others are less generous. Many Israelis, let alone Palestinians, are not convinced that, after a career marked by brutal confrontation with the Arabs, Mr Sharon is about to change his ways. They believe that the prime minister – a master at preserving the status quo – is merely playing for time. It would have been very hard to resist public pressure from Mr Bush this week but the US president's attention could turn

back to domestic matters as the 2004 re-election campaign approaches.

The problem of analysing Mr Sharon's true motivation is compounded by the fact that, outside a small circle of friends and advisers, he keeps his own counsel and is notoriously sparing with public pronouncements. Rather than offering Israelis a detailed exposition of his underlying strategy, he prefers to persuade them that they should trust him to do the right thing.

The tactic served him well in the January general elections, which returned him to power with a greatly increased parliamentary majority. Voters trusted him both to defend Israel's security and to safeguard its interests in the face of international pressure to resolve the conflict following a war in Iraq. His allies say that Mr Sharon's greatest strength is that he is a straight talker and when he commits himself to a course of action, however unpopular, he sticks to it.

But Mr Sharon's detractors say his past record shows a canny ability to bend temporarily to pressure while preserving the freedom to reverse himself in future. They say that whenever, either as an army officer or a politician, he has had to implement a policy with which he does not agree, he has always done so with a reassuring nod and wink to his followers. Trust me, he has seemed to suggest, it will be all right in time.

They recall that after one of several military operations in which he was involved, he accepted an order to confine his men to base for two weeks and then immediately sent them on two weeks leave. His reputation as a daring warrior endeared him to his men but often brought him into conflict with his superiors, to whom he promised one thing but did another.

Mr Sharon was accused of breaching discipline in the 1956 Sinai campaign when he led his men in a desperate battle towards the Suez canal in an unauthorised operation that senior officers had deemed non-essential. His big-

gest blatant deception came in 1982 when, as defence minister, he sent the Israeli army all the way to Beirut after promising that the incursion into Lebanon would halt after 40km.

Sceptics who focus on his tendency to say one thing and do another point to recent contradictory signals as to how he intends to pursue the peace process. At one point, he said the painful concessions he had in mind would include the evacuation of a number of established settlements, which he named. A little later, he assured settlers that Jews would always remain in those same areas. And after he told his Likud party colleagues that Israel could not continue indefinitely to "occupy" 3.5m Palestinians, his office issued a statement implying that this statement did not rule out continued occupation of land.

Some analysts believe the Palestinian state he has in mind will not put an end to the rightwing Zionist project with which he has until now been identified. Mr Sharon, they say, will manoeuvre to keep most, if not all, of the established settlements. An interim state, which would be the model for a future sovereign state, would be completely demilitarised and Israel would control all its borders.

Mr Sharon may have adopted the slogan of separation from the Palestinians, the analysts say, but that is a long way from surrendering his lifelong commitment to retaining effective control over the whole of the historic Land of Israel. He may have accepted the rhetoric of the road map, they say, but his destination remains the same.

If so, much will turn on how focused Mr Bush remains on the Middle East peace process. The US president indicated this week that his administration would maintain contacts with, and pressure on, both sides to keep negotiations moving. Mr Sharon may eventually be able to step back from the position he appeared to take this week on the settlements but his freedom for manoeuvre is far from guaranteed.