

Sharon news raises the political stakes

By KENNETH W. STEIN

Despite Ariel Sharon's personal history that included violence and war against the Arab world, stretching back to Israel's 1948 War of Independence, Arab commentators, politicians and satellite stations are reporting the status of his medical condition live from Israel.

If this were four years ago, Arab outlets would all be jumping for joy on the rooftops at Sharon's demise. More than any other indicator, even the partial concern for Sharon indicates that the Arab world can, if necessary, stomach a Jewish state and worry about who the Israeli electorate may choose in the scheduled March 28 parliamentary elections. Arab politicians now actually care that Sharon's policies of withdrawal carry over to a successor.

Sharon founded the Kadima Party in mid-November as a breakaway alternative to the Likud Party, which he helped found in the 1970s. At least 14 members of Likud joined him immediately, as did other prominent politicians and former army generals.

The party was built around Sharon's personality, charisma,



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recent political track record and vision for the future. In his latest political incarnation, Sharon was perceived as a pragmatist, willing to make compromises for Israel's national security.

This included the withdrawal in August from the Gaza Strip. Recently, Sharon indicated that he wanted his Kadima Party to address internal domestic issues such as poverty, unemployment, social welfare needs and educational betterment.

Without Sharon, the Kadima Party still has a full stable. There are experienced and highly talented politicians who can protect the country's national interests, give encouragement to the economy, and continue the

pragmatic reach to the Palestinians. Sharon's protégé, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, a parliamentarian for more than two decades and former mayor of Jerusalem, has taken over as the interim prime minister.

Former Likud Party members joined Sharon for two reasons: they liked him and they disliked the politics and personality of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu's Likud Party is the least likely to make additional territorial withdrawals and most likely to keep cutting social welfare programs.

Sharon's demise can only help Netanyahu and his party, but it will not restore Netanyahu to the popularity he enjoyed a decade ago.

But Netanyahu could win additional support if Palestinian elections are held at the end of January and Hamas wins a third or more seats in the Legislative Council or if there are more terrorist attacks against Israelis prior to the March elections.



Benjamin Netanyahu, former Israeli prime minister, is a longtime political rival of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.