

Sharon's war crimes in Lebanon: the record

Part Two

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Below we publish the second article in a three-part series examining Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's role in the war crimes committed during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, culminating in the massacre of Palestinian refugees at Sabra and Shatilla.

Within weeks of becoming minister of defence, Sharon renewed military action in Lebanon after two years of peace. He struck at targets in southern Lebanon, eliciting the retaliation that provided the excuse for extensive Israeli bombing and ultimately the terror bombing of Beirut and other civilian targets on July 17-18, 1981 that left hundreds dead. While the US's special envoy Philip Habib negotiated a cease-fire, it was clearly only a matter of time before Israel found a pretext to invade Lebanon.

Sharon began his preparations. In November, he brought military rule in the West Bank and Gaza to an end. Far from improving conditions, however, he banned Palestinian political groups and established a new and more brutal regime under his own direction and that of Menachem Milson, the new civilian administrator. In effect, the West Bank and Gaza were being incorporated into a "Greater Israel". In December, the Golan Heights were also annexed.

The government's mission was to settle so many Israeli Jews in the West Bank and Gaza that the Occupied Territories could not be given back to the Palestinians. It planned to develop the territories and create an infrastructure for factories, particularly sophisticated scientific industries, in the new settlements.

The key to the integration of the Occupied Territories into Greater Israel was the destruction of the Palestinian leadership, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Sharon's goal, which was supported by both the Likud and the Labour parties, was to avoid a political settlement with the PLO at all costs. From Begin and Sharon's perspective Arafat's success in isolating those PLO factions and states such as Iraq and Libya that advocated Israel's destruction was a setback. It meant that the PLO would have to be included in any negotiations for the settlement of the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict, leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state as proposed under the 1981 Fahd Peace Plan.

The 1978 Camp David Accords paved the way for bilateral peace agreements with Israel's Arab neighbours. It also provided Israel with the opportunity to annex the Occupied Territories and prepare for the invasion of Lebanon. To this end, Israel had already made peace with Egypt and was in the process of withdrawing from Sinai, as agreed at Camp David in 1978, thereby ensuring the neutrality of the most important Arab country should Israel attack any of her other neighbours.

Between August 1981 and May 1982, the Israel Defence Force (IDF), with Sharon's authorisation, violated Lebanese airspace 2,125 times and its territorial waters 652 times. Arafat, anxious to gain US support for a deal with Israel, maintained the Habib brokered cease-fire and did not retaliate.

In December 1981, Sharon warned Philip Habib, President Reagan's special envoy, and Morris Draper, the US special ambassador, that PLO shelling of Israeli settlements was intolerable and that if it continued, he

planned to wipe the PLO out completely. The US was concerned at the political repercussions of such a development and Habib made it quite clear that Sharon had no justification for war, saying, "The PLO isn't carrying out many raids. There is no need for such an Israeli reaction. We are living in the twentieth century.... You can't just invade a country like that". Nevertheless, the Pentagon, in the full knowledge of Sharon's plans to invade, stepped up its supply of military goods to Israel in the first few months of 1982. Deliveries were 50 percent up on the previous year and continued throughout June, the first month of the war.

In January 1982, Sharon flew secretly to Beirut to meet Pierre Gemayel and his son, Bashir, who had murdered all their Christian opponents in order to secure the leadership of the Christian groups. Bashir was seeking to become president of Lebanon in the forthcoming elections. Sharon revealed that Israel intended to invade Lebanon, up to Beirut. He demanded that the Phalangists join the Israelis in the battle to drive the PLO out of Beirut and Lebanon and sign a peace treaty with Israel.

Pierre Gemayel turned down both of these requests. However much he may have wanted the Israelis' help he could not be seen to be openly collaborating with them.

In May 1982 Sharon he flew to Washington to enlist President Reagan's support. After Sharon's meeting with the president, Secretary of State Alexander Haig took Sharon on one side and, as one ex-general to another, gave him a friendly word of advice. He warned him that he needed a *casus belli*. "Ariel," he said, "I am telling you this is unsatisfactory.... Nothing should be done in Lebanon without an internationally recognised provocation, and the Israeli reaction should be proportionate to that provocation." While Sharon questioned what constituted a clear provocation, this was good enough as far as he was concerned. He had told his US paymasters about his plans and they hadn't objected to their content. Now all he needed was a suitable pretext.

Later Haig tried to deny that he had given the go-ahead for the invasion, but he qualified this by explaining: "The Israelis had made it very clear that their limit of toleration had been exceeded, and that at the next provocation they were going to react. They told us that. The president knew that." The State Department, when pressed, could not cite a single official statement opposing the invasion apart from the support, quickly withdrawn, for the first UN resolution calling on Israel to terminate its aggression.

Two weeks later, there was a botched attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador, Shlomo Argov, in London. It was carried out by the Abu Nidal group, which was hostile to Arafat and the PLO and operated out of Iraq with no office in Beirut. This was ignored by Prime Minister Begin, as was the PLO's insistence that it had nothing to do with the assassination attempt or Abu Nidal. As far as Begin was concerned: "They are all PLO". In other words, Arafat, as leader of the PLO, was responsible for all the activities of all the Palestinian groups and all Palestinians should be regarded as terrorists to be eliminated. The cabinet gave instructions for Israeli planes to attack PLO positions in and around

Beirut. As the meeting dispersed, Begin said, "We should be prepared for the maximum. We will strike and see what happens."

Israel carried out heavy bombardment of PLO targets including the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla and a hospital. More than 200 people were killed. With Arafat away from Beirut in Amman, Jordan, the Palestinians responded by shelling Israeli settlements in Galilee. Sharon seized on this to announce to the cabinet a few days later that there would be a short operation lasting one or two days called "Operation Peace for Galilee". It was to be limited to pushing the Palestinians back 40-45 kilometres so that they could not shell northern Israel. Israel would not attack the Syrians in Lebanon unless they took action against Israeli forces. When asked about Beirut, Sharon said, "Beirut is out of the picture. This operation is not designed to capture Beirut". Every word was a lie.

While some cabinet members were subsequently to claim that Sharon had deceived them, this was disingenuous to say the least. Two months before the war, Begin had told Shimon Peres and the Labour Party about his plans and the rhetoric with which the invasion was to be sold to the public. As veteran military correspondent Ze'ev Schiff, who has close connections with the Israeli military establishment, wrote in *Ha'aretz* a few weeks before the invasion, "It is not true as we tell the Americans that we do not want to invade Lebanon. There are influential forces, led by the defence minister, which with intelligence and cunning are taking well considered steps to reach a situation that will leave Israel with no choice but to invade Lebanon even if it were to involve a war with Syria."

No sooner had Sharon waived his troops over the border into Lebanon on June 6 than they headed north towards Beirut demolishing the Palestinian camps, driving the people north into largely Muslim West Beirut and incarcerating many of the adult male population along the way. Israel used its complete air superiority and firepower to blast everything before it, albeit sometimes dropping leaflets warning inhabitants to leave before the attacks began. It then sent in its ground forces to clean up afterwards. As the *Jerusalem Post* explained, "With deadly accuracy, the big guns laid waste whole rows of houses and apartment blocks believed to be PLO positions. The fields were pitted with craters.... Israel's strategy at that point was obvious—to clean away a no-man's land through which Israeli tanks could advance and prevent any PLO breakout."

In keeping with Sharon's larger plan of driving Syria out of Lebanon, on June 9 the IDF made an unprovoked attack on the Syrian forces in the Beka'a valley. After Israel knocked out more than 60 aircraft in one day, Syria avoided any further military confrontation with Israel. Thus, Israel had effectively neutralised Syria for the rest of the campaign.

By the end of June, southern Lebanon was devastated. Ten thousand people had been killed, 350,000-400,000 Palestinians had been dispersed, the Israeli army had taken 15,000 prisoners, and little was left standing. According to one Israeli journalist, "The shocking scenes of the destroyed camps proves that the destruction was systematic". Many people have never been unaccounted for. Those who remained were left to the tender mercies of the Phalange militia and Haddad's forces, Israel's proxy in southern Lebanon.

On June 13, the eighth day of the war, Begin told the Knesset that the fighting would stop once the army reached the 40-kilometre line. At that very moment, Sharon was with his troops, which had encircled West Beirut, in Ba'abda, overlooking the city that was now home to 500,000 people. The siege that was to follow would last 70 days.

During that time, the city was bombed extensively using both cluster and phosphorous bombs. This was an effort not only to destroy the PLO and its military installations, but also its entire social base and welfare network: its health and educational services, political and social organisations and, above all, the squalid shantytowns that had become the Palestinians' home in Lebanon.

Not even the hospitals were spared, although they were clearly marked.

By August 6, there were 30 beds available in West Beirut out of a previous total of 1,400, according to the Red Cross. The refugee camps were continuously bombarded, causing more than half of the 125,000 inhabitants of Sabra and Shatilla to flee in the first few weeks of the war, even though no heavy artillery or well-fortified positions were found. Palestinians who tried to leave West Beirut were stopped from doing so by the Israeli forces that patrolled the city.

The UN estimated that 13,500 homes had been severely damaged in West Beirut alone and many thousands more elsewhere, excluding the Palestinian camps. Electricity and water supplies were continually interrupted and food and medicines cut off. The international relief agencies were denied access.

The Lebanese police estimated that more than 19,000 people had been killed and 30,000 wounded between the beginning of June and the end of December. Some 6,775 of these were killed in Beirut and 84 percent were civilians. "But this excluded those who were buried in mass graves where the Lebanese authorities were not informed," they said. In contrast, 340 IDF soldiers had been killed between June and early September and a further 146 by late November. Of these, 117 were killed in the fighting for Beirut.

The purpose of the siege of Beirut and the accompanying brutality was to put maximum pressure on the Lebanese government to force Arafat and the PLO to leave the country. To this effect, Israel had seized control of the capital city of another country, broken every rule in the war crimes book, and was holding half the people of Beirut (all those in West Beirut) hostage.

The US, far from acting as an honest broker, intervened to organise the evacuation of the PLO on Israel's behalf. It offered guarantees to protect Palestinian civilians that were absolutely crucial to the PLO's agreement to leave Beirut. The evidence shows it never honoured these guarantees.

The US sent Habib back to the Middle East to meet Sharon and ascertain his terms for ending the fighting. Habib asked, "Who is to leave Beirut? All the 10,000 [PLO fighters] or just their leaders?" Sharon replied, "All the terrorists. They must all leave. If they refuse, they will be destroyed... Tell them to leave." When Habib countered, saying, "I think it will be impossible to do what you ask", Sharon sent in dozens of fighter jets that unloaded hundreds of tons of high explosives onto Sabra and Shatilla and anti-tank cluster bombs on apartment blocks in West Beirut.

With that, Habib pulled out all the stops to get the Lebanese government to put pressure on Arafat to agree to Sharon's terms. Knowing that Sharon would not accept promises, he even got Arafat to provide a signed guarantee that he would leave with all his fighters.

Habib now had to find Arab states willing to take the Palestinians, but there were few takers. The Arab leaders had all stood by while Lebanon was invaded, even those most verbally vociferous in their opposition to Israel. Few were willing to accept the PLO fighters whom they regarded as troublemakers. Jordan's King Hussein even demanded that if the armed guerrillas went to Syria, they had to be placed far from the border with Jordan. He did allow some Palestinians with Jordanian passports to enter Jordan. Egypt and Syria refused all PLO fighters, while Tunisia, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq and Algeria agreed to take some.

Even after agreement on the PLO evacuation, bombings continued, including the carpet-bombing of Bourj al Barajneh refugee camp. On Saturday, August 21, the first contingent of 12,000 PLO fighters left Beirut by ship. Arafat himself was the last to go on August 30, 1982. The US had arranged with President Bourguiba that he go to Tunisia. A further 10,000 PLO fighters remained in eastern and northern Lebanon, in areas under Syrian control.

The protection of Palestinian civilians left behind in Beirut had been central to the agreement under which the PLO had agreed to evacuate the city. A multinational force of US, French and Italian troops in Beirut were to supervise the evacuation and guarantee their safety. In addition,

there were bilateral agreements between both the US and Lebanese governments and the PLO and an Israeli promise not to enter Beirut.

According to the text of the agreement, “The US will provide its guarantees on the basis of assurances received from the Government of Israel and the leaders of certain Lebanese groups with which it has been in contact.” Habib later confirmed that he had personally signed the agreement guaranteeing protection to the Palestinians. “I got specific guarantees on this from Bashir and from the Israelis—from Sharon,” he said. Habib personally wrote to the Lebanese prime minister saying, “My government will do its utmost to ensure that these assurances [on the part of Israel] are scrupulously observed”.

Almost immediately, Israel broke its promises. The Lebanese army was supposed to have participated in the security operation, but was prevented from doing so by the Israeli armed forces, in clear breach of their agreement to withdraw from Beirut. This was only the first of many such breaches that the US was to sanction. The Israeli armed forces had Arafat within their sights. They could easily have killed him, but the US had extracted a promise from Sharon that he would guarantee Arafat’s safe exit and passage to Tunis: a promise he has recently bitterly and publicly regretted.

As part of the Habib brokered agreement, the Lebanese national police took control of West Beirut and collected weapons and ammunition from the PLO depots, although some were also handed over to the Mourabitoun Muslim militia.

On August 23, in the middle of the evacuation of the PLO, Israel’s man, Bashir Gemayel, who had the largest private army in Lebanon, won the presidential elections. Israel’s control of much of the country gave protection to the key Assembly delegates with the power to choose the president, and provided helicopters to bring them to vote in East Beirut. Gemayel became president of Lebanon on September 23.

Israel had won the war for the Phalange without the latter having lifted a finger. Indeed, the Phalange had refused to fight, having earlier lost some soldiers when fighting against the Palestinians. While the Israeli government rejoiced at the success of its campaign, the Palestinians and the Lebanese Muslims in Beirut, now left defenceless, were terrified. They were at the mercy of the Phalange, Haddad’s armed militia in southern Lebanon and anyone else whom the Israelis chose to back.

Journalist Robert Fisk commented prophetically in the London *Times*: “The civilians of West Beirut will have only the Lebanese army to protect them. It is not the sort of army upon which people of the Muslim sector of the city are likely to place much reliance.” In his book *Pity the Nation*, which provides an eyewitness account of the atrocities in Beirut, Fisk admits that even he did not realise the implications of his own words, or the scale of the carnage that was to follow.

To be continued



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