

Sharon's war crimes in Lebanon: the record

Part Three

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Below we publish the third and final instalment of a 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.

No sooner had Arafat and the last of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) fighters departed Lebanon than Israel's relations with both its patron and vassal became strained, as their interests diverged.

Firstly, the Americans, with a view to mollifying the Arab regimes anxious about the impact of the war on their own domestic stability launched a new peace initiative, known as the Reagan Plan. This plan explicitly ruled out Israeli annexation, sovereignty or permanent domination of the Occupied Territories. It called for a freeze on expanding existing settlements or building new ones and "self government by the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in association with Jordan", otherwise known as the confederation solution. Neither self-government nor the boundaries of such an entity were defined and the PLO was to be excluded, but despite its incoherence and inconsistencies, the plan was more favourable to the Palestinians than anything previously on offer.

However much Israel was reliant on the US, it was not going to accept this and said so quite openly and defiantly. Sharon said, "Not only will Israel not accept it, it will not discuss it... The United States should have saved itself a lot of embarrassment and frustration" by not proposing it. Israel immediately announced the establishment of new settlements in the West Bank and the Golan Heights.

It should be noted that while conflicts between the US and Israel mounted over the next 12 months, Reagan nevertheless increased military aid to Israel in 1983, and proposed that it be maintained at that level for 1984, while Congress increased aid even further.

Relations with Lebanese President-Elect Bashir Gemayel, upon whom Israel was more dependent after the announcement of the Reagan plan, also turned sour. As far as Begin was concerned, it was now pay-back time. He summoned Gemayel to a meeting in Israel and demanded that he sign a peace treaty on September 15.

However much he needed Israeli help, Gemayel was above all a Lebanese nationalist. To retain control of a united Lebanon meant that he had to cut a deal with the Muslim leaders. Signing a deal with Israel, now almost universally perceived as the enemy, would have precipitated the division of Lebanon.

Begin also demanded that Gemayel move into Sabra and Shatilla and clear out the remaining "terrorists", claiming that Arafat had left behind 2,000 PLO fighters. This was another proposal that Gemayel could not implement directly without destabilising Lebanese political relations. He was also outraged by Begin's proposal to establish a military presence in a 45-kilometre area in southern Lebanon under the control of another Israeli stooge, Major Saad Haddad.

Israel had served notice that Gemayel would rule Lebanon only at Israel's behest. At one point in the meeting, Gemayel held out his arms and said to Begin, "Put the hand cuffs on", before adding, "I am not your

vassal." He threatened to charge Haddad with desertion and flatly refused to sign any treaty or to authorise any move against the camps. In truth, the Phalangists were hopelessly split. Some of the Phalange were hostile to Israel and were now collaborating with the Syrians, who were opposed to Gemayel's relations with Israel. Gemayel had to balance between them and the myriad of different factional groups within Lebanon.

On September 3, Israel deployed its armed forces beyond the ceasefire line previously set in agreement with Habib. Sabra and Shatilla on the outskirts of Beirut had become refugee camps for many Palestinians who fled their homes. They were the main areas of the PLO's popular support. The Israeli forces cleared landmines there and established observation posts overlooking the camps. Despite the fact that it was in clear breach of the US ceasefire agreement, neither the US nor any other contingent of the international force appears to have demanded that the Israeli armed forces withdraw.

Israel demanded that the Mourabitoun, the largest Muslim paramilitary organisation and the PLO's staunchest ally in Lebanon, leave Beirut. On September 11, the US pulled out the last of its forces sent in to guarantee the safety of the Palestinians under the Habib agreement, two weeks before its 30-day mandate expired. The US withdrawal triggered the departure of the other international forces. The net result was that the so-called international protectors of the Palestinians had presided over the disarming of the Palestinians and their allies and delivered them into the hands of those they most feared: the Israelis and the Christian militia.

On September 14, Gemayel was assassinated in a massive explosion that demolished the central Phalangist headquarters in Beirut. The Palestinian and Muslim leaders denied any responsibility.

Given that this was the most heavily guarded building in Beirut, the attack must have had insider support. It was never clear which of Gemayel's enemies had killed him.

As soon as Begin heard about Gemayel's assassination, he ignored his promise to the US and ordered the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) to enter West Beirut. He justified his action to Habib's deputy, Morris Draper, as necessary "to prevent acts of revenge by the Christians against the Palestinians" and to maintain order and stability after Gemayel's assassination. A few days later, Sharon let the cat out of the bag. "Our entry into West Beirut was in order to make war against the infrastructure left by the terrorists," he told the Knesset, Israel's parliament. By this he meant the Palestinian civilians and their Muslim allies.

Sharon ordered Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan, later to form the ultra-right-wing party, Tehiya, to let the Phalange militia enter the camps in order to "clean out" the terrorists. The IDF were not to carry the operation. Their proxies could do their dirty work for them. *New York Times* correspondent David Shipler explained why. He said that as early as mid-June, "Israeli officials were speaking privately of a plan, being considered by Defence Minister Ariel Sharon, to allow the Phalangists to go into West Beirut and the camps against the PLO. The calculation was that the Phalangists, with old scores to settle and detailed information on the Palestinian fighters,

would be more ruthless than the Israelis and probably more effective”.

Eitan issued Order Number Six stating that the “refugee camps [Sabra and Shatilla] are not to be entered. Searching and mopping up the camps will be done by the Phalangists and the Lebanese army.” He contacted Elie Hobeika, the murderous Phalangist commander of the Damouri Brigade, and told him what he wanted his men to do.

On September 15, the IDF re-entered Beirut and took control, killing 88 people and wounding 254. It soon surrounded and sealed off Sabra and Shatilla, having attacked smaller camps along the way. At 11:20 a.m. on September 16, Israel admitted that it controlled the camps. An Israeli press statement announced: “The IDF is in control of all the key points in Beirut. Refugee camps harbouring terrorist concentrations remained encircled and enclosed”.

That same day, about 50 Haddad troops that were virtually integrated into the Israeli army and operated entirely under its command were brought to Beirut. Together with about 100 Phalange militia they entered Sabra and Shatilla—a ridiculously small force if there really had been arsenals of weaponry and 2,000 armed guerrillas in the camps, as Sharon had alleged.

There are several journalists, including Robert Fisk, who have written books on the harrowing events in Beirut based upon their own and other eyewitness accounts and on-the-spot interviews with survivors. Other aspects of the story have been pieced together from evidence produced by the Kahan Commission, the Israeli official inquiry into the massacre. But two points need to be stressed: no one ever discovered any arms in the camps and the entry of the Christian militia did not follow any fighting. In other words, the events that followed were a premeditated massacre of innocent civilians. In the next 36 hours, Israel’s proxies, the Christian militia groups, went on a rampage, raping and killing people indiscriminately with knives and guns. People were tortured, including pregnant women, and the bodies of many of the victims were mutilated.

Eyewitnesses attributed most of the killings to Haddad’s forces, but the Phalangists under the command of Elie Hobeika were no less bloodthirsty. A Phalangist asked Hobeika over the radio what should be done with 50 Palestinian women and children. He replied, “This is the last time you are going to ask me a question like that. You know exactly what to do.” The soldier laughed in response.

There were numerous reports that hundreds of men were rounded up during and after the massacre and taken to Israeli detention camps in southern Lebanon. Many of them were never seen again. While the exact number of those killed and injured is not known, Israel estimates suggest that about 800 were killed, although the Palestinian Red Crescent put the number at over 2,000. At least a quarter of these were Lebanese Shiites Muslims.

The atrocities were carried out in full view of the Israeli troops manning observation posts overlooking the camps. By the evening, Lebanese soldiers were already telling the International Red Crescent of atrocities reported to them by Palestinian women in the camps. On the morning of September 17, *Ha’aretz* journalist Ze’ev Schiff found out what was happening and reported it to the Israeli government, although he did not make it public, despite the fact that foreign journalists were beginning to report the atrocities. Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who later became prime minister, claimed he did not understand the message. But even before then, a Phalange commander had radioed General Yaron to tell him “300 civilians and terrorists had been killed”.

Later that day, Chief of Staff Eitan, Generals Drori and Yaron met the Phalangist command and congratulated them on “having carried out good work” and authorised them to bring in fresh forces and complete their work. By the afternoon, at least 45 Israeli soldiers knew what was going on. The Palestinians were pleading with them to stop the bloodbath. They refused.

US intelligence had also learned of the killings. Morris Draper, the US

special envoy, was in no doubt about Israel’s role. On September 17, he demanded of Israel: “You must stop the massacres. They are obscene. I have an officer in the camp counting the bodies. You ought to be ashamed. The situation is rotten and terrible. They are killing children. *You are in absolute control of the area and therefore responsible for that area*” (emphasis added).

Draper’s words provide confirmation, if any is needed, of Israel’s responsibility in international law and under the terms of the Habib-brokered agreement for the safety of the civilian population in Beirut. He had already warned on the previous evening (September 16) when the massacre was already in full swing of the “horrible results” that would follow if the militia were allowed into the camps. But it was only on September 18, 36 hours after the carnage had begun, that the Israelis ordered the militia out of the camps. General Yaron later testified that they did so not for humanitarian reasons but because of pressure from the Americans, an admission that only serves to highlight the US’s criminal refusal to rein in its client throughout the whole period.

The record shows that by any objective reckoning, Sharon is a war criminal whose history of murderous activities and violations of the rules of war in pursuit of Zionism’s political and economic objectives stretch back for half a century.

The record also shows that not only was the massacre backed by the Israelis, it was only made possible because the US flouted its explicit guarantee upon which the agreement on the PLO evacuation depended. The US never formally lodged a protest about either the invasion of Beirut or what happened at Sabra and Shatilla. Once again, whatever the public show of anger or displeasure, in private Israel got the nod to proceed.

While not one of the Arab regimes lifted a finger to help the Palestinians, it was the Israeli working class that said it was not prepared for its government to organise the elimination of the Palestinians, and called a halt to the pogrom. Sabra and Shatilla provoked sustained worldwide outrage, but more importantly, within Israel itself 400,000 people, one in ten of the population, demonstrated on the streets of Tel Aviv in opposition to the Begin government and demanded an inquiry.

The Kahan Commission was established in an attempt to deflate public anger. Its 1983 report was limited in scope and something of a whitewash. Nevertheless, the evidence it produced confirmed the broad outline of events on September 16-18 and Israel’s role in them. Its conclusions, however, did not flow from the evidence presented.

It limited its remit to the immediate circumstances and ignored the context and the subsequent “disappearance” of Palestinians at the hands of the IDF and its proxies in southern Lebanon. The report’s title ignored any mention of the Palestinians. It excluded any consideration of Israel’s legal responsibilities under international law and its obligations under the agreement to which it was a party by the simple expedient of failing to define Beirut as under the control of an occupying power. It concluded that Israel’s armed forces were not participants in the slaughter, a claim that had never seriously been made. The Commission accepted the government and armed forces’ justification for sending in the Christian militia and concluded that the IDF did not know what was going on in the camps, despite eyewitness accounts to the contrary.

While it rejected the accusation that the IDF had “prior knowledge” of the consequences, it did not accept Begin’s contention that the Israeli government had not expected or foreseen the tragic consequences of sending the Christian militia into the camps. The Commission noted that during secret meetings held between Bashir Gemayel and Mossad agents, Israeli officials “heard things from [Bashir] that left no room for doubt that the intention of the Phalange leader was to eliminate the Palestinian problem in Lebanon when he came to power—even if it meant resorting to aberrant methods against the Palestinians.” Furthermore, Israeli generals admitted that they used the Phalange militia because they could give them orders that they could not give to the Lebanese army.

Interestingly, the Commission heaped all the blame for the atrocities on the Phalange led by Hobeika, and denied the “rumours” that Haddad and his forces played any role in the slaughter or were even present, even though numerous eyewitnesses testified to their murderous activities. Yet the Phalange had been closer political allies than Haddad: they had been trained by the Israelis, armed with the same weapons and performed the same services for Israel in Beirut, the Chouf and the Metn regions as Haddad did in the south.

This willingness to point the finger at the Phalange can only be understood in the context of Israel’s plans for the future. As far as the Israelis were concerned, after Gemayel’s assassination the Phalangists had outlived their political shelf life, although they still had their military uses. This meant that Israel was even more reliant on Haddad’s forces to play the key role as its policeman in southern Lebanon. It also explains why Hobeika’s evidence to the Belgian court was expected to be so prejudicial to Sharon. He was prepared to spill the beans, claiming he had video recordings and other evidence that would confirm Sharon’s role in the affair.

The Commission did assign some limited “indirect responsibility” for the massacre on Israel. It condemned Begin, Sharon and the generals with varying degrees of harshness, concluding that Sharon bore “personal responsibility” for what happened in the camps and recommending his removal from office. While Sharon was removed from his post as defence minister, he retained his seat in the cabinet as minister without portfolio.

The Commission made no recommendation about Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan—the man who had expected the massacre, allowed fresh troops in to replace those who had done such a good job, and lied about the IDF’s role—as he was due to retire soon. Eitan went on to become a Knesset member as the founder of an ultra-right-wing party.

General Yaron, who knew about the killings the very first evening and did nothing, was to be suspended for three years. Shortly afterwards he was put in charge of army manpower and training and in 1986 was rewarded with the plum job of military attaché in Washington. The Commission recommended that the director of military intelligence be fired and placed considerable blame on General Drori “without recourse to any further recommendation”.

It has taken nearly 20 years for Ariel Sharon, the man who in 1983 was not fit to be minister of defence, to be deemed fit for the highest office of prime minister. Sabra and Shatilla earned him impeccable credentials as far as the right wing is concerned. The Palestinian policy he has embodied for decades—either genocide or ethnic cleansing—has supplanted the promise of a two state solution embodied in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Now the far right is baying openly for a “population transfer” from the West Bank, an end to “restraint” and the reoccupation of territories seized in the 1967 war, measures that demand a bloodbath that would dwarf Sabra and Shatilla in their savagery.

Concluded

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