

Ariel Sharon: a political assessment

Part one

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This is the first of a two-part article.

No matter how Ariel Sharon responds to medical treatment in the coming days, his political life ended on January 4 when he suffered a massive stroke. It is therefore appropriate to make a political assessment of his career.

This is all the more important in light of the whitewashing of Sharon's brutal life work and the nauseating tributes to the "peacemaker" from imperialist politicians, the liberal as well as the conservative media, and figures across the political spectrum in Israel, including his opponents.

Ariel Sharon will, despite such false accolades, be remembered by millions throughout the world for his anti-Palestinian policy of murder and ethnic cleansing. He is a war criminal whose life has been marked by a series of atrocities perpetrated against the Palestinian people and Israel's Arab neighbours. He escaped prosecution for war crimes committed in Lebanon in 1982 only because the United Nation's International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled three years ago that past and present government leaders cannot be tried for war crimes by a foreign state because of their diplomatic immunity, and can be held to account only in their own country.

Sharon represents more than the criminality of a single man. He rose to become prime minister because his entire military and political career was devoted to pursuing the Zionist aim of a Greater Israel at the expense of the indigenous Palestinian population, of the Israeli working class, who have borne the costs, and the genuine interests of Jewish working people the world over. He could achieve his aims only by violent, military means.

Sharon's political evolution from a Labour Zionist to the foremost representative of the tendency that goes back to the arch-chauvinist Vladimir Jabotinsky expresses the dead-end of the Zionist project and, ultimately, the inability of all nationalist movements, be they Jewish, Palestinian or Arab, to end imperialist domination in the Middle East.

Sharon came from a family of ardent Jewish nationalists. His grandfather's closest friend in his home town of Brest Litovsk in Belarus, then part of Czarist Russia, was the father of Menachem Begin, the future Zionist terrorist, founder of the Likud Party and Israeli prime minister. With the onset of World War One, the family moved to Tblisi in Georgia to escape the fighting.

Sharon claimed in his autobiography *Warrior* that his father, Samuil Sharon, was, like his father before him, a "Jewish nationalist, pure and simple," with "no political allegiances whatsoever, not to socialism or communism or anything else." Samuil Sharon had always intended to emigrate to Palestine.

In 1921, Samuil, having completed his agricultural studies at the university, fled Tblisi with his young wife for Palestine. They made their home in an agricultural settlement surrounded by hostile Arab farmers, not far from Tel Aviv, where Ariel Sharon was born in 1928.

Sharon likes to recall that when he was 13 his father gave him a dagger to protect his family. Sharon said, "The knife was symbolic, to protect ourselves from our enemies. It was a lesson I have never forgotten."

As a young man he joined the Jewish Settlement Police prior to joining the Haganah, the underground Jewish Defence Force and forerunner of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), fighting in the 1948-49 war against Israel's Arab neighbours. It was here that he gained experience in combat against the Palestinians and developed his policy of pre-emptive action, summed up in the mottos "strike first and hardest" and "always escalate."

The Palestinians, for their part, looked to the various bourgeois Arab states to support them. But these regimes were hopelessly divided and too busy looking after their own interests to prevail against the superior forces and training of the Israelis. The Arab nationalist governments that were to come to power in the 1950s under the banner of Pan-Arabism were no more capable of overcoming their differences and their underlying subservience to imperialism—and no more able to defend the Palestinians—than their predecessors.

After the 1948-49 war, Sharon remained a soldier, progressing slowly up the ranks to become a general. He never became chief of staff due to his arrogance, insubordination and a recklessness that did not endear him to his political and military superiors. In 1955 he even faced trial for conduct unbecoming an officer.

Sharon lied and disobeyed orders whenever it suited his purposes. During the invasion of Suez in 1956, he led his paratroopers into an ambush by disregarding orders. In the 1973 war, he led the Israeli forces that eventually crossed the Suez Canal and defeated the Egyptian army in a campaign that won him as many enemies as friends because he disobeyed orders and cease-fire agreements.

Nevertheless, Sharon's actions and methods were to influence Israel's attitude towards the Palestinians, its defence policy, and its relations with its neighbours. In 1953, Sharon became commander of Unit 101, which specialised in behind-the-lines raids that forced Palestinians to flee their homes. He thereby marked out the strategic route that was to lead to the 1956 Sinai campaign.

As Sharon explained in his autobiography, he came to view the objective as being not simply retaliation or even deterrence in the usual sense. He wrote: "It was to create in the Arabs a psychology of defeat, to beat them every time and to beat them so decisively that they would develop the conviction that they could never win. This was another reason I objected to the idea of extremely limited surgical strikes. Not only were such operations technically unrealistic, but I came to believe that whenever we were forced to strike, we should do so with the aim of inflicting heavy losses on the enemy troops."

He first achieved notoriety when in 1953 he invaded Jordan and blew up at least 45 homes in the West Bank village of Qibya, then under Jordanian rule. Unit 101 killed 69 people, half of them women and children. The attack was ostensibly in retaliation for the brutal killing of a woman and two children in central Israel, but Qibya had no connection with the killing.

The same year, Sharon's unit attacked and killed 50 refugees in the El-Bureig refugee camp south of Gaza, then under Egyptian rule.

While the Jordanian operation provoked an international outcry, within Israel it made Sharon a hero and the work of his Unit 101 was expanded. He led other vicious attacks in Jordan, Gaza and Syria. In the early 1970s, as head of the army's southern command, he was responsible for the brutal crackdown on Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip.

The 1967 war was actively encouraged by Sharon. It enabled Israel to put into action long-standing plans for expanding its borders and seizing vast swathes of land from its Arab neighbours. Sharon played a key role in this expansion as divisional commander in Sinai.

The Six Day War was to prove a watershed for Israel and the Middle East. Though Israel had been founded on the basis of the forcible expulsion of the Palestinians, it was lent a certain moral legitimacy by the annihilation of 6 million European Jews in the Nazi holocaust. The 1967 war brought to the fore the essence of the Israeli state as an expansionist entity intent on transforming the Palestinians into permanent refugees.

Within weeks of the war, the Labour-led national unity government established settlements in its newly conquered territories in defiance of international law—an event that was to shape the political, ideological and social physiognomy of Israel for decades to come. A new wave of immigrants from the West, particularly from the US, came and settled in the Occupied Territories. The settlements became a pole of attraction for religious right-wing fundamentalists who founded the settler movement and espoused vigilante tactics to intimidate the Palestinians and drive them off their land. The extension of the Jewish enclaves created a social layer that had a direct vested interest in an expansionary policy.

While their forces were small, from the very first the settlers and ultra-religious groups played an important role in shifting Israeli politics to the right and providing a political base not only for the struggle against the Palestinians, but also against liberal-minded secular Jews. In part, at least, this was because they found a key ally: General Ariel Sharon.

For Sharon, himself a secular Jew and military man, the expansion of the Zionist state and the building of settlements were bound up with security and what he deemed “defensible borders.” But he formed an alliance with the religious movement to pursue these aims, reasoning that the religious fanatics would provide the necessary forces for new Jewish settlements.

The Arab defeat in 1967 led to the growth of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, which adopted the guerrilla tactics espoused by the Algerians and Vietnamese and called for the struggle against Israel to be carried out under the banner of Palestinian nationalism, rather than as part of the failed Nasserite Pan-Arab movement that had betrayed and abandoned his people.

The war had convinced Washington that Israel, as the dominant military power in the region, was the indispensable vehicle through which the US could best advance its interests in the Middle East, including the suppression of radical political movements. In the succeeding years, each and every military victory against Israel's Arab neighbours, and every major campaign against the Palestinians, however much criticized in public by Washington, was followed by increased US aid.

The relationship between the top military brass and the ruling Labour Party was a close one. On becoming a colonel, officers were expected to join the Labour Party, and Sharon joined in 1958. On leaving the army, most of Israel's generals went into politics. Sharon was no exception, but he was the first to split from Labour.

Sharon was aligned with Labour's more right-wing nationalist wing led by David Ben Gurion and Moshe Dayan, a relationship that often protected him from criticism during his military career. His reprisal raids were supported by the hawks within Labour, who became increasingly dominant within the party after 1955.

In 1969, some months before the general election, Sharon became incensed on discovering that his army contract would not be renewed, as he had fallen out with Chief of Staff Chaim Bar Lev over the defence of

Sinai. With no other attractive career opportunity, Sharon looked for a political opening. Finding himself at odds with the ruling Labour Party over a political solution to the Golan Heights, West Bank and Gaza, he made contact with Menachem Begin's Herut Party.

Herut was the political descendant of Jabotinsky's Revisionist movement, whose approach to the Palestinians was spelt out in a 1923 article entitled “The Iron Wall.” The article stated: “Zionist colonisation must be either terminated or carried out against the wishes of the native population. This colonisation can, therefore, be continued and make progress only under the protection of a power independent of the native population—an iron wall, which will be in a position to resist the pressure to the native population. This *in toto* is our policy towards the Arabs... A voluntary reconciliation with the Arabs is out of the question either now or in the near future.”

After resigning from the army in 1973, Sharon was elected to parliament under the banner of the Liberal Party, one of the forerunners of Likud. But within a year he resigned his seat and defected to Labour in order to secure his reservist military command. He served Labour Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as special security advisor for six months before establishing his own party and then dissolving it into Likud in 1977.

By 1977, the Labour Party had lost its political *raison d'être*. The social forces set in motion by the 1967 war combined to bring down the Labour Zionists in the general election of 1977, ending the monopoly of power they had enjoyed for decades and paving the way for Israel's rightward political trajectory and increasing instability. The expansion of Israel's rule via military conquest required a different type of government.

In addition to Sharon, two other former generals, Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizman, became the first leading military figures to desert Labour and its coalition partners for the Revisionist camp. Dayan and Weizman joined Likud and became, respectively, foreign secretary and minister of defence in 1977. Other prominent military figures were soon to follow.

Sharon asked for and obtained the agriculture portfolio in Begin's Likud government. In that post he championed the settlers' cause and encouraged the seizure of Arab lands. “Grab more hills,” he insisted. “Whatever is seized will be ours. Whatever isn't seized will end up in their hands.” His goal of “creating facts on the ground” was aimed at making it impossible to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians.

He was one of three ministers who were key to getting the cabinet to agree to an unprovoked attack on Iraq, in the bombing of its Osirek nuclear plant, in June 1981.

Although he had joined Likud, Sharon saw Israel as being in a perpetual state of crisis that required national unity governments, with himself in a leading role. On several occasions he sought to bring Labour into the government. From 1984 to 1992, there were national unity governments with rotating premierships for Likud and Labour.

It was in his role as minister of defence in the 1981 Likud government that Sharon became internationally recognised as a war criminal, albeit unindicted, for his role in the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut.

Using the opportunity created by the 1978 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, the most important Arab country, Sharon set about creating a new order in the Middle East by invading Lebanon. His aim was the destruction of the Palestinian leadership, the PLO, which, having been driven out of Jordan with the help of Israel in 1970, was then based in Lebanon. Sharon calculated that he could prevent a political settlement with the PLO and secure the permanent economic integration of the Occupied Territories into Israel.

He also sought to destroy Syria's power in the region and establish a right-wing Christian government in Lebanon that would be friendly towards Israel.

Using the pretext of an assassination attempt on Israel's ambassador to Britain by a Palestinian terrorist group hostile to Arafat and the PLO,

Sharon threw the full might of Israel's armed forces against Lebanon in June 1982. After Israel knocked out more than 60 of Syria's aircraft in Lebanon in one day, Syria took no further part in the defence of Lebanon against Israel, leaving the PLO isolated.

The Israeli military machine devastated southern Lebanon and bombed Beirut unmercifully for the next two months in order to force the Lebanese government to expel Arafat and the PLO. Sharon seized control of the capital city of another country, broke every rule in the war crimes book, and held half the people of Beirut (those in West Beirut) hostage. He targeted not only the PLO and its military installations, but also its social base and welfare network: its health and educational services, political and social organisations and, above all, the shantytowns inhabited by the Palestinian refugees.

The scale of the carnage and suffering was enormous. The UN estimated that 13,500 homes were 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. International relief agencies were denied access. The Lebanese police estimated that more than 19,000 people were killed and 30,000 wounded between the beginning of June and the end of December.

Not a single one of the Arab nationalist regimes lifted a finger to defend the Lebanese and Palestinian people.

The US special envoy in Beirut pressed the Lebanese government to put pressure on Arafat to agree to Sharon's terms. Knowing that Sharon would not accept promises, he got Arafat to provide a signed guarantee that he would leave with all his fighters. The US guaranteed the protection of the Palestinian civilians left behind in Beirut and secured a promise from Israel not to re-enter Beirut.

But within days Sharon reneged on his promise. He ordered the Israeli army back into West Beirut on September 15, ostensibly to maintain order and stability after the assassination of Lebanon's president-elect, an Israeli stooge. A few days later, he told the Israeli parliament: "Our entry into West Beirut was in order to make war against the infrastructure left by the terrorists," meaning the Palestinian civilians and their Muslim allies.

Once Israeli armed forces had gained control of the city and sealed off the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla in West Beirut, after attacking other smaller camps, Sharon, under a long-standing plan, ordered Israel's chief of staff to let Lebanon's fascistic forces, the Phalangists, into Sabra and Shatilla. Sharon's 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.

This was a murderous and unprovoked attack against an unarmed civilian population. While the exact number of those killed and injured is not known, the Palestinian Red Crescent put the number at over 2,000. At least a quarter of these were Lebanese Shiite Muslims. 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.

The atrocities were carried out in full view of Israeli troops who were manning observation posts overlooking the camps. As minister of defence of the occupying power, which under international law was in charge of the overall safety of the population, Sharon bore responsibility for the massacre. Israel was, moreover, party to the US-brokered agreement to protect the Palestinians.

Sharon was responsible for authorising the Phalange to enter the camps, while Israeli troops watched, and carry out the initial massacre. He then allowed the subsequent internment, torture and murder of inhabitants of the camps to occur.

The massacre provoked worldwide outrage and within Israel itself 400,000 people, one in ten of the population, took to the streets of Tel

Aviv to oppose the Begin government and demand an inquiry. The government-appointed Kahan Commission, established to deflate public anger, was limited in scope and essentially a whitewash. But it could not avoid assigning limited "indirect responsibility" for the massacre to Israel.

The commission condemned Begin, Sharon and the generals with varying degrees of harshness, and concluded that Sharon bore "personal responsibility" for what happened in the camps. It recommended Sharon's removal, saying he was "unfit to hold public office."

Having been found to be personally responsible for enabling the massacre, Sharon became something of a pariah internationally, unwelcome in the US and Europe.

Within Israel, however, he remained a key political player. He became an icon for the right wing. Removed from his post as defence minister, he retained his seat in the cabinet and continued to hold ministerial posts in every subsequent Likud-led government, with responsibility for trade and industry (1984-1989), construction and housing (1990-1992) and national infrastructure (1996-1998).

Throughout this period, Sharon worked to expand the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and divert resources to them. The State Comptroller's report in 1992 spoke of mismanagement, suspected illegalities and overspending. Sharon himself bought an apartment in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the midst of 20,000 Arabs and just 40 Jews.

Likud rule came to an end in 1992—and with it, Sharon's seat in government—as the result of a number of factors. The turn of the Soviet Union to capitalist restoration and its reintegration into world imperialism signalled the end of Moscow's support for Arab nationalism. The spontaneous uprising of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza in December 1987 convinced the Palestinian, Israeli and Arab elites, as well as US imperialism, that some sort of Palestinian state was the only way of stopping the uprising from radicalising the entire region.

Yasser Arafat and the PLO found themselves completely isolated following their support for Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War in 1991.

For the Israeli bourgeoisie, peace with Israel's Arab neighbours promised more new markets than Israel's garrison state could ever deliver. The price of a wider regional settlement and access to markets that would make Israel a regional economic power was some kind of arrangement with the Palestinians, if not a full withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and Jerusalem as demanded by international conventions and UN resolutions.

This recognition paved the way for the return of a Labour government under Yitzhak Rabin, pledged to a deal with the Palestinians. The result was the ill-fated Oslo Accords, famously signed on the lawn of the White House in 1993.

Israel was able to secure an agreement with the PLO about a future state of Palestine whose borders would be based, not on a return to Israel's 1967 borders as international law and UN resolutions demanded, but on negotiations between Israel and the PLO. The accords envisioned a Palestinian state on less than 22 percent of the land of Mandate or pre-1948 Palestine.

Under the agreement, a PLO-led interim Palestinian Authority would take charge of security in the Occupied Territories, freeing Israel from the burden of military occupation while the Zionist regime was left in control of borders, foreign policy and the protection of existing Jewish settlements—illegal under international law—in the West Bank and Gaza. The West Bank was divided into non-contiguous areas and militarised Israeli-controlled roads connected heavily fortified Jewish settlements.

In effect, Israel put Arafat in charge of policing the popular opposition of the Palestinians to Israel's occupation and repression. Rabin and Arafat agreed to resolve issues such as the status of Jerusalem and the refugees' right of return, and to establish a Palestinian state within five years. The PLO's support for such a truncated state left a political vacuum that was filled by the political Islamists, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. However, their

opposition to Oslo was not based on any viable perspective for defending the rights of the Palestinian masses and uniting the working people of the Middle East, Jewish as well as Arab, against Zionism and imperialism. It was based upon a nationalist and fundamentally reactionary, communalist perspective.

To be continued



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