

Ariel Sharon: a political assessment-Part two

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This is the conclusion of a two-part article. Part one was posted on January 18.

For the religious and ultra-nationalist forces towards whom Likud was increasingly orientated after its defeat in the 1992 election, the agreement with the PLO under the Oslo Accords of 1993 was a betrayal. It meant the surrender of part of “Eretz Israel,” the biblical land of Israel.

They believed that the Jews “had an eternal and inalienable right to biblical Palestine”—not only the East Bank of Jordan, but also the slopes of Lebanon and the approaches to the Nile. While Likud was not formally committed to establishing control over the “land of Israel,” it was committed to a Greater Israel that was, at the very least, significantly larger than the country’s pre-1967 territory.

Benyamin Netanyahu was the Israeli ally of the Republican neo-conservative faction in the US that rejected Clinton’s policy of reaching an agreement with the PLO. He became leader of Likud in 1993.

Opposed to any negotiations with the PLO and to the establishment of a Palestinian state, no matter how truncated, Netanyahu refused to accept the re-partition of the West Bank. He and his colleagues in Likud turned to the ultra-nationalist and religious forces to terrorise and provoke the Palestinians and sabotage the Oslo Accords.

They routinely likened Rabin, Shimon Peres and the Labour Party to British pre-war Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and other appeasers of Hitler, and compared Oslo to the 1938 Munich agreement with the Nazis. They played a crucial role in inciting the far right and creating the political environment that led to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a religious zealot in November 1995.

The assassination revealed the political Frankenstein monster that the Israeli elite had created by its expansionist policies, especially in the aftermath of the 1967 war, and foreshadowed a rightward lurch away from any settlement with the Palestinians. While the Israeli ruling elite, for the most part, condemned the killing and the right-wing forces behind it, and attempts at a negotiated peace agreement continued before finally reaching an impasse in 2000, the assassination provoked a major political crisis.

In 1996, Likud was returned to power on a wave of revulsion and fear within Israel over a number of terrorist attacks that were laid at the door of the PLO. Netanyahu’s ascendancy froze negotiations with the Palestinians, but pressure from Washington forced him to take part in discussions at the Wye Plantation in Maryland organised by President Bill Clinton in 1998. That same year Netanyahu brought forward Sharon, now portrayed as an elder statesman, as his foreign minister. It was Sharon who was given the responsibility of handling the talks at Wye.

Likud refused to recognise the Oslo Accords, but accepted “the facts created by the Oslo agreement.” Israel would not regain the cities now controlled by the Palestinian Authority. But if there was to be some form of Palestinian entity, then Sharon and Netanyahu would ensure that as much land as possible remained under Israeli control. And they adamantly rejected key Palestinian demands such as sovereignty over East Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinian refugees to Israel.

Under Wye, Israel agreed to transfer additional territory on the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority, create a safe passage for the free

movement of Palestinians between Gaza and the West Bank, and release some of its 3,000 Palestinian prisoners. In return, the Palestinian Authority undertook to rein in the militant anti-Israeli groups such as Hamas, clamp down on the possession of arms, and remove the clauses in the PLO’s charter that called for the destruction of Israel. Arafat even agreed to work under the direct supervision of the CIA.

But Netanyahu was unable to sell the deal to his coalition partners, and froze it after a single pullback in December 1998, alleging that the Palestinians had broken the agreement. It is widely believed that Sharon took advantage of his public position to enrich himself, his family and friends, as the corruption trial of his former associate, David Appel, subsequently indicated.

The majority of Israelis were still anxious for some resolution of the conflict and an end to the occupation of Southern Lebanon. Netanyahu’s coalition collapsed and Likud splintered. It was routed in the 1999 elections, when Israelis voted for a new Labour coalition government under Ehud Barak, who pledged to revive the stalled talks with the Palestinians.

It was after Likud’s disastrous election defeat that Sharon won the leadership of the party, allegedly with the help of illegal campaign contributions, for which his son, as his campaign manager, has now been convicted. Sharon, then 71, was at the time seen very much as yesterday’s man and nothing more than a caretaker leader of Likud. He remained largely in the background as party leader until the Camp David talks in July 2000.

Both the Camp David talks and the Labour government were ultimately doomed because Oslo had failed to bring any alleviation of the Palestinians’ physical, social and economic oppression. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority had benefited not the Palestinian masses, but only a small elite around Arafat. Two weeks of intensive talks between Barak and Arafat, brokered by Clinton, failed to produce an agreement.

Despite Arafat’s willingness to make major concessions—Israel’s annexation of most of the settlements, refusal to allow more than 100,000 of the 3.6 million Palestinians living outside Israel to return to the homes they fled in 1948 and 1967, an extremely truncated Palestinian state—he could not accept Barak’s proposals on the fate of Jerusalem. The Palestinians sought the return of East Jerusalem, seized by Israel from Jordan in the 1967 war, as the capital of their future state.

Barak proposed that Israel keep “residual sovereignty” over all the holy sites in Jerusalem’s Old City, while giving the Palestinians shared sovereignty of some religious sites and more outlying districts of East Jerusalem, with overall sovereignty remaining with Israel. This was something to which Arafat could not possibly agree. The peace talks, and with them the whole so-called peace process, collapsed at Camp David because it was no longer possible to put off or conceal the massive concessions to Israel which had always been implicit in the process.

After the failure of the Camp David talks, it took little for Sharon to torpedo both Oslo and the Labour government. He denounced Labour’s meagre concessions to the Palestinians at Camp David and drew support away from Barak.

Two months later, Barak gave his permission for Sharon to enter the

Temple Mount, backed by a huge armed entourage. Barak, whose shaky coalition rested upon the right-wing Shas party, did not want to alienate the ultra-nationalist and religious forces. He took a calculated decision, undoubtedly with Washington's blessings, to back Sharon's incendiary action in order to punish Arafat and the Palestinians and shift policy in a more confrontational direction.

Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount was a deliberate provocation aimed at scuppering any chance of salvaging the Oslo Accords and thereby continuing the expansion of the settlements on the West Bank. It produced an eruption of militant protest by the Palestinians—the second Intifada—which provided the excuse for a massive and bloody Israeli response.

After a brief and unsustainable makeover as the “party of peace,” Labour called an early general election in February 2001 that paved the way for Sharon.

Nearly 20 years after he was deemed unfit to be minister of defence, Sharon assumed the premiership. This was not because the majority of Israelis endorsed his policies. Indeed, only 37 percent of eligible voters cast ballots for him, and opinion polls consistently showed that the majority of Israelis wanted an end to the conflict with the Palestinians. Rather, he won because there was a gaping political vacuum on the left, with Labour unwilling and unable to advance a genuine policy for peace and no significant party fighting against the fundamentally reactionary underpinnings of the Zionist regime and presenting a genuine socialist alternative to the various strands of nationalist politics.

Indeed, Labour demonstrated its fundamental agreement with Sharon by joining Likud in a coalition government.

Sharon had a policy that articulated the interests of his backers—within Washington and Israel's ruling elite—and could win the support of the settlers and the religious parties. A new consensus in favour of war had emerged within the Israeli ruling elite, including the Labour Party leadership.

With his premiership, Sharon returned to his tried and tested policy of creating “facts on the ground.” Oslo was dead and he would now determine unilaterally the shape and extent of any future Palestinian state, so as to maximize the benefits accruing to Israel.

To this end, Sharon waged a sustained and criminal campaign of military repression against a largely defenceless people, aiming to end Arafat's leadership of the Palestinians in the process. This included invasions and aerial bombardments of the Occupied Territories, house demolitions, hundreds of roadblocks, curfews, political assassinations, imprisonment without trial, and torture. The construction of settlements escalated and the land grab continued.

In March 2002, in order to pre-empt an informal peace initiative in Geneva and a plan submitted by the Arab states, Sharon sent in the army to reoccupy the cities in the West Bank under the control of the Palestinian Authority and smash up the PA's political infrastructure. There were widespread civilian casualties.

Arafat's compound, from which he ruled the PA, was reduced to rubble. Arafat himself was kept a virtual prisoner, unable to travel or receive visitors, and denied access to medical treatment until international pressure forced Israel to allow him—when close to death—to leave for a Paris hospital.

But the mounting crisis provoked by the Intifada, the military suppression of the Palestinians, and recession provoked bitter opposition within the working class, which led to a political crisis within Sharon's Likud-Labour coalition. Labour walked out of the government in October 2002 over the funding of the settlements despite mounting economic and social hardships for Israeli workers. Unable to stitch together another coalition, Sharon was forced to call an early general election in February 2003.

He was again able to win the election only because of the lack of any

genuine alternative perspective on offer. Only one sixth of the electorate voted for Likud in the lowest turnout ever in an Israeli general election.

Sharon's re-election signified not so much a rightward shift as a profound alienation from official politics. In the campaign, Labour made no serious attempt even to raise the question of the economy—the issue that had precipitated the election in the first place.

Insofar as Sharon was able to seize the initiative, it was because Likud's racist, anti-Arab policies most consistently and ruthlessly expressed the logic and requirements of Zionist rule. He established a new government—the most right-wing in Israel's history—in partnership with the ultra-nationalist and religious parties.

Sharon pressed ahead his “security wall”—declared illegal by the International Court of Justice—that annexed to Israel half the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and confines the Palestinians to a humiliating and squalid ghetto existence.

To the extent that Sharon was forced to reconcile himself to some kind of two-state solution, it was one in which Israel unilaterally defined its borders and consigned the Palestinian statelet to a position of utter subordination and prostration. To this end, Arafat was declared persona non grata, as Sharon, and the Bush administration in the US, insisted that Israel had no “partner for peace.”

Any future negotiations would take place only with a Palestinian leadership acceptable to Israel and Washington and at the point of a gun—as has been confirmed with the coming to power of Mahmoud Abbas after Arafat's death in November 2004.

In Lebanon, Sharon on several occasions upped the ante with provocations and bombing raids aimed at creating a pretext for a full-scale military intervention. He accused Syria of supplying Hezbollah militants in south Lebanon with thousands of surface to air missiles capable of striking northern Israeli towns and cities and demanded that Syria rein in the Islamic fundamentalist group. He threatened Iran with aerial bombardment of its nuclear plants. All of these provocations were aimed at widening the US “war on terror” to include Israel's enemies in the region, but Washington has up to now held back from giving him the green light to proceed further.

However, Sharon was largely successful in securing US support for his expansionist policy. The significance of President Bush's “Road Map” was that, while it called for negotiations over a mini-Palestinian state, it made them conditional on the immediate cessation of the Intifada by the Palestinians in the interests of Israeli security. Sharon made short shrift of the prospects of any talks by mounting one provocative attack after another.

He was also successful in getting tacit US approval for the expansion of existing settlements and the annexation of East Jerusalem. Sharon had promoted his aim of a Greater Israel, which, if not as large as he would have liked, was much larger than Israel's pre-1967 borders. Crucially, as far as Sharon and his advisors were concerned, with such borders Israel would be militarily defensible and more politically and culturally homogeneous since it would not include areas with a substantial Palestinian population.

His expansionist military policy came at a huge cost to the Israeli working class. Sharon appointed former International Monetary Fund staffer Stanley Fischer to head Israel's central bank, and his arch rival, Netanyahu, as minister of finance. This triumvirate introduced a raft of market reforms—privatisations, cuts in social expenditure, tax windfalls for the rich—that brought misery, unemployment and poverty to increasing numbers of Israeli workers and their families.

As the price for continued backing from Washington, Sharon had only to make some minor concessions to the Palestinians. It was this that lay behind Sharon's unilateral “disengagement” from Gaza, in the teeth of opposition from the ultra-nationalist and religious forces, allowing the international media to recast the “Beirut Butcher” as a “peacemaker.”

The vast majority of political commentators implied that Sharon had had some kind of Damascene conversion, had seen the error of his ways and was now ready to reach some accommodation with the Palestinians. This was a gross distortion of the political reality.

Sharon himself openly admitted to his supporters in Israel that the tactical withdrawal of the 8,000 settlers from Gaza had nothing to do with any peace settlement, and was instead aimed at winning US support for Israel's permanent annexation of Palestinian land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. An expanded Israel without Gaza had the added advantage of excluding 1.4 million of a Palestinian population that would in 20 years exceed that of the Israeli Jews.

By including the Labour Party leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shimon Peres in his coalition, Sharon was able to promote the myth favoured by the Bush administration that disengagement from Gaza was a major Israeli concession and represented a step towards a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

While Israel withdrew its military installations and settlers from Gaza, this is no way made Gaza a genuinely sovereign entity. Without handing over Gaza's territorial waters, air space and water supply, and providing a safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank, in accordance with international law, Israel remains an occupying power.

The disengagement leaves Israel in military control and can be reversed at any time, as Israel's recent bombings, targeted killings, buffer zones and sonic booms over Gaza have demonstrated. Indeed, the removal of the Jewish settlers made the task of suppressing and intimidating the Palestinians both easier and cheaper.

Nevertheless, the pullout from Gaza was popular with the majority of Israelis who wanted an end to the long-running conflict and resented the cost of the settlements. It seemed to many that Sharon's unilateralism offered a way forward after years of stalemate.

But for the ultra-right and semi-fascistic wing of the Likud party and the small religious and nationalist parties that Sharon had done so much to promote, the pullout was an unpardonable crime. Netanyahu used these layers in his power struggle with Sharon, making it impossible for Sharon to control his fractious coalition. He was able to remain in power only thanks to the Labour party, which joined his unstable coalition in December 2004.

This alliance, in turn, became unworkable, as Labour was forced to prop up a government that was waging economic war on the working class at home in order to prosecute the military war against the Palestinians. Sharon decided to split from Likud and form his own party, Kadima, when the left-talking Amir Peretz won the leadership of the Labour Party and pulled its ministers out of the coalition last November.

Sharon took with him most of the key government figures in what was an essentially re-branded version of Likud, but no longer in thrall to the settler and religious parties. Sharon's new party could, he hoped, secure a new coalition arrangement with Labour on the false promise of a unilaterally imposed settlement with the Palestinians. This made an early election, now set for March 28, inevitable.

That Israel should have been ruled by a septuagenarian war criminal, mired in corruption and with no obvious successor, points to the sclerotic and diseased nature of the Zionist state. Far from bequeathing peace, his legacy is one of political turmoil from which civil war cannot be excluded.

According to the international media commentary, Sharon is some hugely charismatic figure—a political giant whose presence is critical to a peaceful solution of the long running Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

If Sharon's policy and methods constitute "peacemaking" for the imperialist powers and their servile opinion writers, this has major implications.

Israel's assassinations of political leaders, its deliberate engineering of regime change and land grabs carried out in the name of security are not merely endorsed by Washington. Rather, they parallel the United States'

own foreign policy for the Middle East and elsewhere.

As Iraq demonstrated, a new era of militarism, colonial adventures and oppression abroad, and a savage assault on the democratic rights of the working class at home, has begun. It is this turn towards a policy of militarism and colonialism by the US and the other imperialist powers—with a concomitant turn towards criminality within their ruling circles—that in large part accounts for the media's ongoing attempts to rehabilitate Sharon.

Sharon, the leader of a regime that functions as a garrison state in the Middle East and as a surrogate, pawn and provocateur on behalf of Washington, is truly a "man of peace" cast in the same mould as George W. Bush.

But there is a second factor that has enabled the world's media to give a gloss of respectability to Ariel Sharon. Not one of the erstwhile promoters of "peace" and the "two-state solution," including the architects of Oslo, Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin and "Peace Now," has denounced this characterisation as a fraud.

Sharon's rise to power and popular support—in spite of his well known history—was facilitated by two interrelated processes. First, the bankruptcy of these same Israeli Labour lefts, which is rooted in their acceptance of the Zionist and capitalist framework, made them incapable of challenging the more aggressive Zionist perspective that came to dominate under Sharon's leadership. In essence, both Zionist tendencies recognised that the prospect of the Palestinians becoming a majority in a state whose citizenship is based on religious identity constituted a threat to the state's very existence.

Second, under the political tutelage of Zionism, the bitter legacy of the centuries of oppression of the Jewish people—above all the terrible experience of the Holocaust—has been refracted and interpreted in the most reactionary way. Zionism sought to inculcate a siege mentality that said, "Never again will Jews be victims." Sharon—"the bulldozer"—exploited these sentiments to cast himself as the strongman whose ruthless methods were necessary to take on the sea of enemies surrounding Israel.

It is a tragic irony of history that sections of the Jewish people, who had long been associated with progressive movements and had been the victims of the worst crime in history, should themselves have absorbed the outlook of their persecutors and accepted the military subjugation, ghettoisation and emiseration of the Palestinian people. But this reactionary outlook is by no means universally accepted: Time and again, the Israeli working class sought a way out of this terrible conflict and a path towards peace with the Palestinians.

Despite the problems in the political development of the Israeli working class, there remains widespread opposition to the agenda of the ruling elite. There is, however, no political vehicle and programme to give expression to this opposition. It is impossible to find a way out of this impasse without a break from the nationalist and communalist agenda of Zionism. This is why it is absolutely essential to renew the socialist and internationalist culture in which the Jewish workers and intellectuals played such a central role in a previous era. This is the only way that Ariel Sharon's bitter legacy can be overcome.

Concluded



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