

Ariel Sharon, war criminal (February 26, 1928-January 11, 2014)

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Former Israeli prime minister, general and unindicted war criminal Ariel Sharon was pronounced dead on Saturday, January 11 at the age 85. He had lain for eight years in a comatose state after suffering a series of strokes in January 2006.

Under investigation for corruption at the time, he had been kept alive on the insistence of his family, despite the advice of the doctors treating him, while relatives sorted out his financial affairs.

Sharon is justly reviled by millions for his policies of provocation, murder and ethnic cleansing. His entire military and political career, for which he earned the nickname “butcher of the Palestinians,” was marked by a series of atrocities carried out against both the Palestinians and Israel’s Arab neighbours. The most notorious was his collusion with the Lebanese fascist Phalange in the September 1982 massacre of over 3,000 Palestinians in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, following the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon.

The Israeli government-appointed Kahan Commission concluded that Sharon, as minister of defence and commander of the occupying force, bore “personal responsibility” for this barbarous crime. But he was never prosecuted and remained in the Israeli cabinet.

More than any other politician, Sharon was the architect and promoter of Israel’s expansionist policy. The cost of this policy continues to be borne directly by the Palestinian masses and indirectly by the Israeli working class, in the form of social cuts and tax hikes carried out to fund a militarised and increasingly anti-democratic state.

A necessary concomitant of Sharon’s Greater Israel policy was the advocacy of communalist and ethno-religious politics, including ethnic cleansing that has involved countless attacks on Palestinians, Israel’s own Arab citizens and migrant workers. As the gap between rich and poor has grown, due in large part to the economic policies pursued by Sharon, the state has increased its reliance on right-wing settlers and extreme nationalist zealots, who provide the basis for the emergence of fascist tendencies within Israel. Extreme nationalism is encouraged to divert growing anger over declining living standards and social inequality along reactionary lines.

Sharon may be dead, but his bitter legacy lives on. It is embodied in the policies of Israel’s political establishment. The Likud Party that Sharon fashioned, as well as the break-away Kadima he later formed as his own political vehicle, have increasingly come into conflict with Israeli workers because of their costly and bloody war against the Palestinians, combined with their reactionary social policies.

The response to Sharon’s death has been extremely polarised. In Ramallah, there was cheering among Palestinians at the news. Jibril Rajub, a senior Fatah official, blamed Sharon for the 2004 death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. He said, “Sharon was a criminal, responsible for the assassination of Arafat, and we would have hoped to see him appear before the International Criminal Court as a war criminal.”

A Hamas leader in Gaza, Khalil al-Hayya, said, “We will remember Ariel Sharon as the man who killed, destroyed and caused suffering for

several Palestinian generations.”

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who had established a cordial relationship with Sharon, refrained from commenting on his death so as not to jeopardise the Palestinian Authority’s relations with Israel.

Within Israel itself, the right wing lauded him, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu describing Sharon to be “first and foremost, a brave soldier and an outstanding military commander,” who “had a central role in the battle for Israel’s security from the very beginning.” *Ha’aretz*, speaking for Israel’s nominal liberal establishment, while acknowledging Sharon’s role as the “butcher of the Palestinians” and “champion of controversy,” wrote, “For all his flaws, Israel is poorer without leaders like Sharon.”

The liberals have praised him for the 2005 pullout from Gaza and formation of the Kadima party, portraying him as some sort of pragmatic peacemaker. Kadima has supported the establishment of a Palestinian statelet, accompanied by a “population transfer” sufficient to maintain Israel’s Jewish majority.

The pullout from Gaza, far from a move in the direction of peace with the Palestinians, provided the cover for US support for a land grab aimed at permanently annexing both Jerusalem and at least half of the West Bank. It paved the way for even greater suffering through the imposition of a siege and full scale military assaults on Gaza in 2006 and 2008-9.

On the international arena, there is a degree of nervousness in official circles over Sharon’s death. The tributes to him, though sickening, have been somewhat muted. The imperialist politicians have generally praised him for being a great patriot, while glossing over his crimes, for which, like President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, he should have faced prosecution for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

US President Barack Obama said that as “Israel says goodbye to Prime Minister Sharon, we join with the Israeli people in honouring his commitment to his country.”

Bush, who held office when Sharon was prime minister, said he had been honoured to “know this man of courage and call him friend.” Likewise, former President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary, the former secretary of state, said Sharon had given his life to Israel and it had been “an honour to work with him, argue with him, and watch him always trying to find the right path for his beloved country.”

British Prime Minister David Cameron lauded the “brave and controversial decisions” that Sharon had taken in pursuit of “peace,” and described him as one of the most significant figures in Israeli history.

US Secretary of State John Kerry went further, calling this warmonger a man of peace. He said that while it was no secret that the US had had differences with the late Israeli leader at times, he would never forget meeting “with this big bear of a man when he became prime minister as he sought to bend the course of history toward peace.”

French President Francois Hollande lauded him as a man of peace, saying that after a long military and political career, “he made the choice

to turn towards dialogue with Palestinians.”

The unstated implication of these comments is that present Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should strike some sort of deal with the Palestinians to better enable the imperialist powers to pursue their predatory interests in the region. However, within Israel, Sharon’s death will be used as a jingoistic rallying cry by right-wing zealots to reject any possibility of a deal with the Palestinians, such as the agreement US Secretary of State Kerry is trying to impose, even though the agreement would be largely on terms dictated by Netanyahu.

Netanyahu ordered a state funeral for Monday, thereby skirting the religious edict requiring burial within a day. But such is Sharon’s notoriety that few heads of state or government are expected to attend. The Obama administration is sending Vice President Joseph Biden, Russia, its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and Britain, former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Whatever their reservations, the eulogising of Sharon as a patriot and man of peace and the cynical airbrushing of his crimes by the current and former war criminals in the White House and their allies is motivated by the fact that they have all followed the path he pioneered—targeted assassinations by means of drones, economic blockades, pre-emptive wars, and military lockdowns and occupations.

Below we are republishing an assessment of Sharon’s military and political career originally posted in two parts on January 16 and 18, 2006, following the stroke that left him in a coma.

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Ariel Sharon: a political assessment

By Jean Shaoul

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 Nations 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.

Early life and military career

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 Tsarist 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 Israel Defence Forces (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 1967 war

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 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.

Sharon enters politics

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.

Sharon, the war criminal

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 Shatila 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 Shatila 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 Shatila. 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 3,000. 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.

The Oslo Accords

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.

For the religious and ultra-nationalist forces towards whom Likud was increasingly oriented 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.

Benjamin Netanyahu was the Israeli ally of the Republican neo-conservative faction in the US that rejected US President 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.

Sharon as prime minister

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 annexes 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.

What accounts for Sharon's rise to power?

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—were 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 immiseration 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.



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