

Ariel Sharon: Beyond the Eulogies

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There were mixed reactions after it was announced by Gilad Sharon, the son of Israeli former prime minister Arik (Ariel) Sharon, from the Chaim Sehba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer that his father had passed away in his hospital bed on January 11, 2014.

Officials from the US and other countries that have traditionally backed Israel began sending their condolences. Some lionized Sharon as a great leader while others, aware of Sharon's blood-stained history, were more cautious with their words.

Architect of Modern Israel?

"I remember reading about Arik in the papers when I was a young lawyer in Boston and marveling at his commitment to cause and country. I will 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, even as it meant testing the patience of his own longtime supporters and the limits of his own, lifelong convictions in the process," US Secretary of State John Kerry said of Sharon.

Kerry's boss in the White House, President Barack Obama, was more impersonal than his secretary of state in the selection of his words.

"On behalf of the American people, Michelle and I send our deepest condolences to the family of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and to the people of Israel on the loss of a leader who dedicated his life to the State of Israel," he said in a statement.

Senator John McCain's condolences would utterly lionize Sharon by having nothing but praise for the deceased former prime minister. McCain would state that Tel Aviv *"has lost one of its greatest heroes and defenders."*

North of the border from Washington, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose government in Ottawa has been one of Israel's staunchest supporters, would also join McCain in praising the dead Israeli leader as *"one of the architects of modern-day Israel."*

Cautious or not about their condolences, these officials all essentially described Sharon, who served as PM from 2001 until he fell into a coma in 2006, as the man who has shaped modern Israel. They would equate Sharon's life with that of the State of Israel as if Ariel Sharon were the very country of Israel itself. Secretary Kerry would even articulate this point by saying, *"Ariel Sharon's journey was Israel's journey."*

A Divisive Death

Sharon has proven to be just as divisive in death as he was in life. While eulogies and condolences to Israel were coming from the US, Canada, the UK, France, Germany, and more inconspicuous places like Columbia and Singapore, there was a mixture of criticism, welcome, and restrained silence from the Palestinians, the next-door Arab countries, and the vast majority of the world.

Little sorrow has been felt for Sharon's death in Arab societies. The Palestinians particularly loathed him as a murderer that was responsible for the killing of unarmed civilians throughout his life. Events like the Qibya Massacre in 1953 or the Shatila and Sabre Massacre in 1982 were hallmarks of his reputation to Palestinians and Arabs that earned him the epithet of *"butcher."*

The impotent Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas initially stayed deafeningly silent not wishing to anger the Israelis and knowing full well that any condolences from Ramallah would make Abbas even more unpopular among the Palestinians.

Other Palestinian officials across the political spectrum, however, expressed the Palestinian people's sentiments about the late Sharon in their remarks.



Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon sits in the Knesset, or parliament, before the opening of the winter session October 15, 2001.(Reuters / Natalie Behring)

"After eight years, he is going in the same direction as other tyrants and criminals whose hands were covered with Palestinian blood," Khalil Ismail Al-Haya, a senior Palestinian official for Hamas in the Gaza Strip, remarked to *Reuters*. Tawfik Tirawi, a security advisor to Mahmoud Abbas and the former security aide of the late Yasser Arafat, would also weigh in, commenting that Ariel Sharon *"wanted to erase the Palestinian people from the map"* and *"wanted to kill us, but at the end of the day, Sharon is dead and the Palestinian people are alive."* Jibril Rajub, a Fatah official, took the chance to accuse Sharon of murdering the late Arafat in 2004.

Even amongst the Israeli population there were mixed reactions to Sharon's death with some Israelis remembering him as one of Israel's most corrupt and dishonest politicians and a criminal while others even welcoming his death for the role he played in performing the execution of the so-called '*disengagement*' that forced Israeli settlers to leave the Gaza Strip. In connection with this, an attempt to effectively outlaw any expressions of satisfaction about his death has been initiated by the Israeli government. The Israeli media has reported that Public Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch angrily described negative public expressions against Ariel Sharon's death as criminal acts and as a consequence has instructed Israeli police units to find any public signs expressing satisfaction at Sharon's demise liable for criminal prosecution.

Sharon the Impenitent Soldier, Slayer of Arabs

Sharon started his life as a soldier fighting for the establishment of Israel in 1948 and was adamant that the entire land be forcibly cleared of Palestinians. Others would more accurately describe this as "*ethnic cleansing*." Holding on to these convictions, he was appointed the head of Unit 101, a commando unit responsible for brutally enforcing Israeli collective punishment on Palestinian villages. From a Palestinian perspective Unit 101 was a death squad.

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who described Sharon as a pathological liar, ordered him to carry out the Qibya Massacre against unarmed civilians while Sharon was responsible for Israeli reprisals. *The New York Times* misleadingly recently referred to this as the "*Battle of Qibya*" to hide the true nature of what happened; there was never a two-sided fight and more than half the people killed by Sharon were women and children. The act was condemned internationally and Sharon claimed that he thought most the civilian homes — forty-five of which he razed to the ground — were empty and that an armed force was there, but UN observers contradict those claims as fiction in their reports. Many Palestinians were murdered trying to run out of their doorways in an attempt to escape his rampage.

As a soldier Sharon was insolent, refusing to follow orders many times. While commanding an elite Israeli paratrooper brigade in 1956 he ignored his orders and advanced to the Mitla Pass where he was defeated and forced back by the Egyptians. During the fighting, Sharon had Egyptian prisoners of war killed and even ordered the massacre of forty-nine Egyptian quarry workers who were civilians that played no role whatsoever in the fighting between Egypt and Israel. In 1973 he ignored direct commands by rushing into battle. Sharon was more fortunate this time, because he came out victorious. Moshe Dayan said that if Israel had lost the war against Egypt in 1973 that Ariel Sharon, then acting as a major-general, would have been tried by a military court for not following his orders again.

Father of Israeli Settlement Strategy and Lebanese War?

His success in 1973 empowered his political ambitions. He then made his entry into the Israeli cabinet in 1977 as the minister of agriculture. This was a post that he would hold until he became responsible for the Israeli armed forces. A fervent expansionist, as the minister of agriculture Sharon created the current Israeli settlement system that he admitted was specifically designed to partition the West Bank and annex most the Palestinian territory there.

In 1982 he became the cabinet minister responsible for the Israeli military. In his new post, Sharon ordered Israeli forces to invade Lebanon during its civil war. The Israeli invasion

compounded the violence and resulted in the death of approximately 20,000 civilians.

There have been efforts to paint Sharon as the lone individual responsible for the Israeli war in Lebanon, but this is a revisionist myth. The Israeli invasion was eagerly approved by a prevalent political consensus in Israel and almost unanimously supported by Israeli society when it was launched.



Prime Minister elect Ariel “Arik” Sharon touches the stones of the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, as he prays while visiting Judaism’s holiest site in Jerusalem’s Old City February 7, 2001.(Reuters/jwh/aa)

Under the pretext of fighting the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to justify their invasion, the Israeli military advancing into Beirut from Lebanon’s southern border. The main objectives were not to fight the PLO, but to install an Israeli-controlled puppet regime in Lebanon, expand Israeli territory, and to usurp water from the Litani River.

Once the Israeli military arrived in Beirut, Sharon had the Palestinian refugee camps there surrounded by his armed forces. He then arranged for Lebanese collaborators in the Kataeb (Phalange) militia — currently represented by the Kataeb and Lebanese Forces political parties in the Hariri-led March 14 Alliance that is arming the anti-government forces in Syria — to enter Shatila and Sabra with Israeli aid and cover. What ensued was a three-day orgy of torture, rape, and murder of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians, most of whom were women and children.

International pressure and public outrage forced Israel to form the Kahan Commission. Sharon’s reaction was to reject any wrong doing in Lebanon, but even a large part of the Israeli political establishment rejected that he had no role in the massacres. The Jewish Dutch director George Sluizer claimed to have personally even seen Sharon use his handgun to murder two Palestinian infants inside Lebanon. The Kahan Commission concluded in the end that Sharon was personally responsible and guilty of knowingly letting the massacre of

civilians take place, but it took no action against him. Domestic political pressure and rivalries within Israel were what resulted in the disgraced Sharon's resignation in 1983 from his post as the minister responsible for the Israeli military.

The Shatila and Sabre Marracre would come back to hunt Sharon in the future as well. Elie Hobeika, the leader of the Phalange militia that carried out the massacre in 1982, would volunteer in 2001 to testify to a Belgian court that Sharon and the Israelis played a central role in its execution. Hobeika, however, would be assassinated by a car bomb a few months before he was scheduled to testify in Belgium.

The car bomb murder of Hobeika in 2001 would open the door to an era of car bomb assassinations targeting Lebanese politicians that many in Lebanon point the finger of responsibility for at the Israelis. One way or another, these car bombs are part of Sharon's legacy in Lebanon. During the course of the fighting in Lebanon, it was Sharon that authorized the use of car bombs as an Israeli tactic of war.

The Arsonist that lit the Second Intifada?

The political polarization of the sentiments of Israeli society against the Palestinians during their Second Intifada (Uprising) helped catapult Sharon into the office of prime minister and undermine his political opponents. Sharon is widely credited for starting the Second Intifada in the year 2000 by paying a controversial public visit to Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Noble Sanctuary (known as Haram Al-Sharif in Arabic to Muslims) or Temple Mount (known as Har Habayit in Hebrew to Jewry) with a Likudnik delegation and an armed riot police guard of about one thousand men. Ironically, the visit was approved by both Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the Palestinian Authority, the latter insisting that Sharon not do anything controversial like threaten to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Sharon's visit is widely seen as the flame that lit a powder keg. He has been accused of deliberately engineering an end to the peace process by instigating violence as a means of helping himself politically in his bid to become Israeli prime minister. Accompanied by a flagrantly large armed guard, his visit to what is seen as both symbolically sentimental and holy ground by Muslims and Jews was merely the provocative straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak, for the disillusioned Palestinians. Tensions were already high among the Palestinians about the continuation of the Israeli occupation and the bankruptcy of the Oslo Accords and peace talks, but for them Sharon's presence was a provocation.

Sharon's Gaza Disengagement/Re-engagement Show

Not only did officials from countries supporting Israel describe Ariel Sharon as the individual who has shaped modern-day Israel, they have also described him as a soldier who turned into a man of peace.

British Prime Minister David Cameron stated that *"Ariel Sharon is one of the most significant figures in Israeli history and as prime minister he took brave and controversial decisions in pursuit of peace."*

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon would echo Cameron by saying, *"Sharon will be remembered for his political courage and determination to carry through with the painful and historic decision to withdraw Israeli settlers and troops from the Gaza Strip."*

Stating that Sharon's *"brave decision to withdraw Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip"* was a

“historic step” towards peace, German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel would use the same theme.

The emphasis on Ariel Sharon’s decision in 2005 to unilaterally withdraw the Israeli military and Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip is harkened as a mark of his commitment for peace, but Sharon’s so-called *‘disengagement’* from Gaza was at its heart a strategic and Machiavellian move aimed at furthering Israel’s expansionist objective of annexing East Jerusalem and most the West Bank. Above all things, his *‘disengagement’* was intended to enable Israeli territorial expansion. He sent almost four times the number of Israeli settlers into the West Bank to compensate for the 8,000 Israeli settlers he removed from Gaza. Nor was there much of a withdrawal from Gaza either, because Israel still controlled the trade, entry, exit, finances, coastline, the water, the air, and airwaves. It also set up a security perimeter inside Gaza and periodically had troops and sailors conduct patrols inside Gaza’s territory.



A crane is seen next to Homes in a Jewish settlement near Jerusalem known to Israelis as Har Homa and to Palestinians as Jabal Abu Ghneim January 3, 2014.(Reuters /Ammar Awad)

The decision to leave Gaza was actually made through security, demographic, and geopolitical calculations to give the maximum amount of Palestinians the smallest amount of land possible and to control the Palestinians in the most effective way. There was no way that Israel would annex the minuscule Gaza Strip where the highest concentration of the Palestinian population lived, amounting for just under 40 percent of their population, when it could annex the much larger and less densely-populated West Bank. Moreover, with the Israeli settlers in Gaza gone, Israel was free to effectively blockade the most densely held Palestinian area and to launch its military assaults to pressure the Palestinians, which would have come at high costs or have been nearly impossible for Israel if the settlers remained. Coupled with the construction of the Separation/Apartheid Wall, the *‘disengagement’* was

really a 're-engagement' for more effective Israeli control over Gaza that would be sold internationally as a part of a desire for peace.

West Bank Colonization Tactics and Siege of Gaza: Is Netanyahu continuing Sharon's Legacy?

Although Benjamin Netanyahu publicly opposed the so-called 'disengagement' from Gaza in 2005, the same strategies are being implemented and continued by him. In this regard, it can be argued that Prime Minister Netanyahu is executing Sharon's plan to create Greater Israel by continuing his expansionist policy of annexing East Jerusalem and the West Bank through the systematic development of [Israeli settlements/colonies](#). Beneath the surface, the continuation and expansion of the Israeli settlements and the leverage they have given Israel in negotiations is why Ariel Sharon is really the "architect of modern Israel."

Sharon's objectives of annexing East Jerusalem and the West Bank, however, are not a view he shaped, they are part of an expansionist ideology widely held in the Israeli political establishment and popularly supported in Israeli society. He is merely the man who put together the strategy of doing it while appearing to pursue peace. In this context, it should come as no surprise just days before Sharon died, in late-December 2013, that the Israeli government's Ministerial Legislative Committee voted to annex the West Bank's Jordan Valley, effectively insuring that the West Bank will barely have a border with Jordan and that most the West Bank will be encircled by Israel.

Nor does Sharon's death mean that Israel's embrace of militarism has ended. Sharon is just one of many military leaders, like Shimon Peres, that have built Israel with war and around the military as the most important institution in Israel. To equate Ariel Sharon with Israel means that his death marks an end to a bloody history, when in reality the bloody history still continues with Netanyahu and Israel's current leaders. Since Sharon left office due to his coma, Israel attacked Lebanon in 2006, has launching multiple attacks on Gaza, conducted attacks on Syria, and repeatedly threatened to start wars against other countries. Tel Aviv's leaders have always blamed Hamas for attacking Gaza, but it is important to note that they have done this while Israel continues its military operations and occupation in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, even though Fatah rules the West Bank and has insured that no real attacks have been launched against Israel for years.

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