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Sharon the Terrorist

A Career Drafted in Blood

by JEFFREY ST. CLAIR and ALEXANDER COCKBURN

JANUARY 17-19, 2014

Ariel Sharon was elected prime minister of Israel on February 6, 2001. Some incorrigible optimists then suggested that only a right-wing extremist of Sharon's notoriety would boast the credentials to broker lasting peace with the Palestinians.

Maybe so. History is not devoid of such examples. But Sharon's record was not encouraging. His crucial role in provoking Palestinian uprisings by his excursions under heavy military protection to holy sites in Jerusalem is well known. A little more faintly perhaps people recall the verdict of an Israeli commission of inquiry finding that Sharon bore some responsibility for the dreadful Phalangist massacres in Palestinian refugee camps outside Beirut.

But in fact Sharon's history as a terrorist, with documented participation in what can be fairly stigmatized as war crimes, goes back to the early 1950s. Here is a brief resume, culled in part from a two-part series on Sharon in the well-respected Hebrew-language Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*.

Sharon was born in 1928 and as a young man joined the Haganah, the underground military organization of Israel in its pre-state days. In 1953 he was given command of Unit 101, whose mission is often described as that of retaliation against Arab attacks on Jewish villages. In fact, as can be seen from two terrible onslaughts, one of them very well known, Unit 101's purpose was that of instilling terror by the infliction of discriminate, murderous violence not only on able-bodied fighters but on the young, the old, the helpless.

Sharon's first documented sortie as a terrorist was in August of 1953 on the refugee camp of El-Bureig, south of Gaza. An Israeli history of the unit records 50 refugees as having been killed; other sources allege 15 or 20. Major-General Vagn Bennike, the UN commander, reported that "bombs were thrown" by Sharon's men "through the windows of huts in which the refugees were sleeping and, as they fled, they were attacked by small arms and automatic weapons."

In October of 1953 came the attack by Sharon's Unit 101 on the Jordanian village of Qibya, whose "stain" Israel's foreign minister at the time, Moshe Sharett, confided to his diary, "would stick to us and not be washed away for many years."

Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, cited in a petition demanding retribution against Sharon for war crimes, describes the massacre thus:

"Sharon's order was to penetrate Qibya, blow up houses and inflict heavy casualties on its inhabitants. His success in carrying out the order surpassed all expectations. The full and macabre story of what happened at Qibya was revealed only during the morning after the attack. The village had been reduced to rubble: forty-five houses had been blown up, and sixty-nine civilians, two thirds of them women and children, had been killed. Sharon and his men claimed that they believed that all the inhabitants had run away and that they had no idea that anyone was hiding inside the houses.

"The UN observer who inspected the scene reached a different conclusion: 'One story was repeated time after time: the bullet splintered door, the body sprawled across the threshold, indicating that the inhabitants had been forced by heavy fire to stay inside until their homes were blown up over them.' The slaughter in Qibya was described contemporaneously in a letter to the president of the United Nations Security Council dated October 16, 1953...from the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of Jordan to the United States. On 14 October 1953 at 9:30 at night, he wrote, Israeli troops launched a battalion-scale attack on the

village of Qibya in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (at the time the West Bank was annexed to Jordan).

“According to the diplomat’s account, Israeli forces had entered the village and systematically murdered all occupants of houses, using automatic weapons, grenades and incendiaries. On 14 October, the bodies of 42 Arab civilians had been recovered; several more bodies had been still under the wreckage. Forty houses, the village school and a reservoir had been destroyed. Quantities of unused explosives, bearing Israel army markings in Hebrew, had been found in the village. At about 3 a.m., to cover their withdrawal, Israeli support troops had begun shelling the neighboring villages of Budrus and Shuqba from positions in Israel. The U.S. Department of State issued a statement on 18 October 1953, expressing its ‘deepest sympathy for the families of those who lost their lives’ in the Qibya attack as well as the conviction that those responsible ‘should be brought to account and that effective measures should be taken to prevent such incidents in the future.’”

Let us move next to Sharon’s conduct when he was head of the Southern Command of Israel’s Defense Forces in the early 1970s. The Gaza “clearances” were vividly described by Phil Reeves in a piece in *The London Independent* on January 21, 2001:

“Thirty years have elapsed since Ariel Sharon was the head of the Israel Defence Forces’ southern command, charged with the task of ‘pacifying’ the recalcitrant Gaza Strip after the 1967 war. But the old men still remember it well. Especially the old men on Wreckage Street. Until late 1970, Wreckage, or Had’d, Street wasn’t a street, just one of scores of narrow, nameless alleys weaving through Gaza City’s Beach Camp, a shantytown cluttered with low, two-roomed houses, built with UN aid for refugees from the 1948 war who then, as now, were waiting for the international community to settle their future. The street acquired its name after an unusually prolonged visit from Mr Sharon’s soldiers. Their orders were to bulldoze hundreds of homes to carve a wide, straight street. This would allow Israeli troops and their heavy armoured vehicles to move easily through the camp, to exert control and hunt down men from the Palestinian Liberation Army.

“‘They came at night and began marking the houses they wanted to demolish with red paint,’ said Ibrahim Ghanim, 70, a retired labourer. ‘In the morning they came back, and ordered everyone to leave. I remember all the soldiers shouting at people, Yalla, yalla, yalla, yalla! They threw everyone’s belongings into the street. Then Sharon brought in bulldozers and started

flattening the street. He did the whole lot, almost in one day. And the soldiers would beat people, can you imagine? Soldiers with guns, beating little kids?’

“By the time the Israeli army’s work was done, hundreds of homes were destroyed, not only in Wreckage Street but through the camp, as Sharon ploughed out a grid of wide security roads. Many of the refugees took shelter in schools, or squeezed into the already badly over-crowded homes of relatives. Other families, usually those with a Palestinian political activist, were loaded into trucks and taken to exile in a town in the heart of the Sinai Desert, then controlled by Israel.”

The devastation of Beach Camp was far from the exception. As Reeves reported:

“In August 1971 alone, troops under Mr Sharon’s command destroyed some 2,000 homes in the Gaza Strip, uprooting 16,000 people for the second time in their lives. Hundreds of young Palestinian men were arrested and deported to Jordan and Lebanon. Six hundred relatives of suspected guerrillas were exiled to Sinai. In the second half of 1971, 104 guerrillas were assassinated. ‘The policy at that time was not to arrest suspects, but to assassinate them,’ said Raji Sourani, director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights in Gaza City.”

As defense minister in Menachem Begin’s second government, Sharon was the commander who stunned his colleagues by instigating the full-dress 1982 assault on Lebanon, with the express design of dispatching all Palestinians to Jordan and making Lebanon an Israeli client state. From the vantage point of 20 years, we can see it was a war plan that cost untold suffering, many thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese lives, and also the deaths of over 1000 Israeli soldiers.

Sharon also engendered the infamous massacres at Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. The slaughter in the two contiguous camps took place from 6 at night on September 16, 1982 until 8 in the morning on September 18, in an area until the control of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The perpetrators were members of the Phalange militia, the Lebanese force that was armed by and closely allied with Israel since the onset of Lebanon’s civil war in 1975. The victims during the 62-hour rampage included infants, children, women (including pregnant women) and the elderly, some of whom were mutilated or disemboweled before or after they were killed.

To cite only one post-massacre eyewitness account, that of pro-Israeli journalist Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*: “Mostly I saw groups of young men in their twenties and

thirties who had been lined up against walls, tied by their hands and feet, and then mowed down gangland-style with fusillades of machine-gun fire.”

An official Israeli commission of inquiry—chaired by Yitzhak Kahan, president of Israel’s Supreme Court—investigated the massacre, and in February 1983 publicly released its findings (without Appendix B, which remained secret). The Kahan Commission found that Ariel Sharon, among other Israelis, had direct responsibility for the massacre. The commission’s report stated:

“It is our view that responsibility is to be imputed to the Minister of Defense for having disregarded the danger of acts of vengeance and bloodshed by the Phalangists against the population of the refugee camps, and having failed to take this danger into account when he decided to have the Phalangists enter the camps. In addition, responsibility is to be imputed to the Minister of Defense for not ordering appropriate measures for preventing or reducing the danger of massacre as a condition for the Phalangists’ entry into the camps. These blunders constitute the non-fulfillment of a duty with which the Defense Minister was charged.”

Sharon refused to resign. Finally, on February 14, 1983, he was relieved of his duties as defense minister, though he remained in the cabinet as minister without portfolio.

Sharon’s career was in eclipse, but he continued to burnish his bloody credentials as a Likud ultra. Sharon was always against any sort of peace deal, unless on terms entirely impossible for Palestinians to accept. In 1979, as a member of Begin’s cabinet, he voted against a peace treaty with Egypt. In 1985 he voted against the withdrawal of Israeli troops to the so-called security zone in Southern Lebanon. In 1991 he opposed Israel’s participation in the Madrid peace conference. In 1993 he voted no in the Knesset on the Oslo agreement. The following year he abstained in the Knesset on a vote over a peace treaty with Jordan. He voted against the Hebron agreement in 1997 and objected to the withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Sharon believed in establishing “facts on the ground.” As Begin’s minister of agriculture in the late 1970s, he established many of the West Bank settlements that are now a major obstruction to any peace deal. His unwavering position? Not another square inch of land for Palestinians on the West Bank. He would agree to a Palestinian state on the existing areas of either total or partial Palestinian control, 42 percent of the West Bank. Israel would retain control of the highways across the West Bank and, most crucially, the water sources. Jerusalem would remain under Israeli sovereignty and he pushed to continue building around the city. The Golan Heights would remain under Israel’s control.

It can be argued that Sharon represents the long-term policy of all Israeli governments, without any obscuring fluff or verbal embroidery. Ben-Gurion was complicit in the terror missions of Unit 101. Every Israeli government has condoned or overtly supported settlements and building around Jerusalem. But that doesn't begin to confront Sharon's sinister, violent shadow across the past half century.

That shadow is, perhaps, best evoked by a young Israeli woman, Ilil Komey, 16, who confronted Ariel Sharon when he visited her agricultural high school outside Beersheva on the eve of the elections. The scene was aired on Israeli television. The teenage girl whose father suffered shell shock during the Lebanon war stood and pointed her finger at the 72-year-old Sharon. "I think you sent my father into Lebanon," Ilil said. "Ariel Sharon, I accuse you of having made me suffer for 16 some odd years. I accuse you of having made my father suffer for over 16 years. I accuse you of a lot of things that made a lot of people suffer in this country. I don't think that you can now be elected as prime minister."

Sadly, Ilil was wrong. Sharon was elected, not in spite of his savage resumé but because of it. That's the grim truth of the situation.