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## Sharon is Dead, but Sharonism Lives On

By Phyllis Bennis

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There is nothing remotely honorable in the legacy of Ariel Sharon, Israel's perhaps most consistent war criminal.



The Butcher of Beirut, as he was long known, is no more. After eight years in a coma, during which the militaristic hard-right leader was re-branded a peacenik, Israeli General Ariel Sharon was finally pronounced dead.

The tributes are already pouring in, including from Secretary of State John Kerry, who paid lip service to occasional disagreements with Sharon, but reassured Israel that “Our nation shares

your loss and honors Ariel Sharon's memory." For the rest of the world, of course, there is nothing – nothing – remotely honorable in the legacy of Israel's perhaps most consistent war criminal.

As Israeli journalist Dimi Reider [documents in 972mag.org](http://972mag.org), Sharon's violence began early, in Israel's pre-statehood period, when he joined the Haganah in the mid 1940s, and first saw action in the run-up to the 1948 War, when his unit staged raids against Arab villages around Kfar Malal. He was seriously wounded in the battle of Latrun and temporarily left the army in 1949 to study at the Hebrew University. By personal order of David Ben-Gurion, however, Sharon was recalled to military service and asked to head the newly established Unit 101.

The unit was created specifically for the purpose of retaliatory raids against Palestinian refugee guerrillas, who operated across the Jordanian and Egyptian borders. As often as not, the attacks were against civilian targets, including refugee camps and villages in the Egyptian-occupied Gaza Strip and Jordanian-occupied West Bank.

Attacks against Palestinians were a leit-motif of Sharon's biography. In the 1970s, after Israel had occupied the Gaza Strip, he sent armored bulldozers into the crowded Jabaliya refugee camp to create new military control roads, demolishing hundreds of families' homes along the way. It gave rise to one of his first nicknames, the Bulldozer of Gaza.

And as the [Palestine Center's Yousef Munayyer reminds us](#), the timeline of Sharon's war crimes is a long one. The attacks on civilians that began before Israel was declared a state, continued afterwards, and led directly to what quickly became known as the Qibya massacre in 1953.

Qibya is a Palestinian village in the West Bank located close to the Green Line. In an Israeli attack on the village which was led on the ground by Sharon at the time, scores of homes were destroyed while civilians were still inside. The outcome was a massacre that left 69 Palestinians dead, most of whom were women and children.

The attack was internationally condemned and Israel scrambled to control the damage to its image following the massacre. The United Nations condemned the massacre and the U.S. State department said those responsible "should be brought to account and that effective measures should be taken to prevent such incidents in the future." None of the officials responsible were held to account, however, and this culture of impunity would be a recurring theme not only in Israeli history but in Ariel Sharon's history in particular.

Other attacks would follow, most notoriously the Sabra-Shatila massacre of 1982. Early that summer, Israeli troops under Sharon's authority as Defense Minister, invaded and occupied South Lebanon. After weeks of a deadly siege of Beirut, the U.S. arranged for PLO troops to be withdrawn from the city, leaving the Palestinian refugee camps filled with women, children and old people unguarded. On the night of September 16, Israeli troops surrounded the two camps in West Beirut, preventing anyone in the camps from leaving. They then set flares, to light the way

for soldiers of the Israeli-backed Lebanese Phalange and Lebanese Forces militias who attacked the defenseless camp, slaughtering 2,000 Palestinian civilians, hundreds of them children.

Israel and its top military official were held responsible – but without consequence. In 1983 the United Nations' MacBride commission found Israel responsible for the violence. The same year, Israel's own Kahan Commission found Israel “indirectly” responsible, but noted that Sharon bore personal responsibility “for ignoring the danger of bloodshed and revenge.” The general – then named the Butcher of Beirut for the first time – was thus recognized as culpable, but there was no accountability. Sharon resigned as defense minister, but – in accordance with Israel's impunity-based political system – he remained in the Cabinet, and within two years returned as a Likud minister. There was no trial, no indictment, not even a dishonorable discharge from the Israel Defense Forces as a result of his war crimes.

Starting in 1985, when he became minister for housing and construction, Sharon was responsible for adding almost 150,000 housing units to Jews-only Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. From then on, the nature of General Sharon's war crimes – violations of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions – shifted from acts carried out in direct battle, to acts carried out on the settlement-pocked hilltops of the occupied Palestinian territory.

Sharon remained central to the Israeli government – a few times in the opposition, most of the time in leadership, including as prime minister, until his 2006 stroke put him out of commission permanently. He opposed the Oslo process, and became a key champion of the increasingly powerful settler movement. And so while the nature of the violations changed, the fact of Sharon's violations of international law continued. The massacres violated the laws of war. The settlements violated the Geneva Conventions. The Apartheid Wall (that Sharon also orchestrated) violated the International Court of Justice ruling.

In 2005 Sharon arranged to evacuate the 5,000 or so Israeli settlers and the Israeli soldiers from the occupied Gaza Strip. Sharon was suddenly hailed as a peacemaker. But IDF soldiers remained in command of Gaza, redeployed just outside the Strip and surrounding it with military force. Israel maintained complete control over Gaza's borders, exit and entry of goods and people, the air space, the seas off Gaza's coast, the economy and the lives of Gaza's one and a half million Palestinians – 75% of whom are under 25 years old. The redeployment changed the nature of Israel's occupation from traditional settler colonialism to an old-fashioned siege. But Gaza remains occupied. The real goal of the Gaza “disengagement” plan was achieved: in the words of Sharon's top aide, Dov Weisglass, it was the “freezing of the peace process.” Mission accomplished.

And Sharon remains a war criminal. Kerry had one other thing right in his accolade: “Ariel Sharon's journey was Israel's journey,” he said. He was right. Only in Israel, where the powerful right wing has long been superseded by the far right, the ultra right, and the fascist right, could an unrepentant war criminal, never changing his views, suddenly become the epitome of the political center. Sharon is dead – long live Sharonism.

