

Sharon's war crimes in Lebanon: the record

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Below we publish the first in a three-part series examining Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's role in the war crimes committed during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, culminating in the massacre of Palestinian refugees at Sabra and Shatilla.

An attempt by Palestinians to bring Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon before a Belgian court on charges of war crimes appears to have been thwarted. On February 14, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled that past and present government leaders cannot be tried for war crimes by a foreign state because of their diplomatic immunity and can only be held to account in their own country.

Under a 1993 law, Belgium gave itself the right to try war crimes committed by anyone anywhere at any time. A Belgian judge was due to rule on March 6 whether a case against Sharon should go to trial, but a legal adviser to the Belgian government, Jan Devadder, said that the International Court of Justice "has clearly ruled government leaders and heads of state enjoy total immunity from prosecution. The Sharon case, in my opinion, is closed."

The court determined that a former or serving government official could not be tried in a foreign court because "throughout the duration of his or her office [the minister], when abroad, enjoys full immunity from criminal jurisdiction". This was so whether or not the accused was abroad on official business or in a private capacity.

The court stressed that the judgement does not have any bearing on the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, as he is being tried by an international body, the United Nations, and not by a foreign government. But this legal technicality aside, the International Court of Justice has made clear that it wishes to see only those deemed to be acting contrary to the interests of the imperialist powers facing prosecution and not their political allies such as Sharon.

At this point Sharon still faces charges relating to the brutal massacre of 2,000 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla, Beirut, in September 1982. The prosecution, working on behalf of the relatives of some of his victims, alleges that Sharon bore responsibility in his capacity as minister of defence of the occupying power, which under international law was in charge of the overall safety of the population and was party to an agreement to protect the Palestinians. It also holds Sharon responsible for the direct role the Israeli army played both in the massacre and the subsequent internment, torture and disappearance of many of the camps' inhabitants.

Sharon's responsibility for Sabra and Shatilla is well known. Following an international and domestic uproar, the Israeli government was forced to hold an inquiry. The resulting Kahan Commission laid direct responsibility on Elie Hobeika, the leader of Lebanon's fascist Phalange militia that carried out the bloodbath, but said that Sharon bore "personal responsibility". He was forced to resign from his post in 1983 although he remained in the cabinet.

Sharon has vigorously opposed the attempt to prosecute him and all the main political parties in Israel have rallied to his defence. Israel has put pressure on Belgium to change its laws and levelled accusations of anti-Semitism in an attempt to prevent the case against its prime minister from proceeding.

There are also accusations that Israeli forces carried out the assassination of Hobeika a few weeks ago in order to eliminate a key witness to the events of September 16-18, 1982. With the approval of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), Hobeika and Major Saad Haddad, of the Southern Lebanon Army, had entered the refugee camp and gone on the rampage for 40 hours. They butchered an estimated 2,000 men, women and children, as the IDF, having sealed off the exits, looked on. Hobeika was blown up just a few days after announcing that he would testify against Sharon.

The case came at a particularly sensitive time. The indictment and trial of a serving Israeli prime minister would transform the status of the Zionist state itself in the eyes of world opinion and severely embarrass Sharon's main backers, the Bush administration in the United States. The fact that the case has got as far as it has is indicative of the growing divergence between Europe and the US in the Middle East in general and the Israel-Palestinian conflict in particular.

There has been growing frustration within Europe's capitals over Bush's ever more open support for Sharon's war mongering, which is threatening to ignite social tensions throughout the Middle East and destabilise the Arab regimes upon whom they depend to police their financial interests. But none of Europe's governments, including Belgium, were genuinely desirous of parading Sharon before a court and The Hague decision will have come as a relief.

Regardless of what now happens in Belgium, however, anyone wishing to understand the nature of the Zionist regime and the underlying motives of the Likud-Labour government's renewed military offensive against the Palestinians would do well to examine the events leading up to the Sabra and Shatilla massacre and Sharon's criminal role in them.

While public attention has focused on the atrocities at Sabra and Shatilla, the record shows that these were the culmination of 15 years of military action by Israel in Lebanon, much of which constituted war crimes. Israel's aim was to disperse the Palestinian refugees created by the establishment of the Zionist state and the 1948-9, 1967 and 1973 wars. To this end, Sharon sought to destroy the Palestinians' emerging political and military organisations, sow divisions between the Palestinians and those countries in which they sought sanctuary, and prevent the unification of the Arab working classes and oppressed masses against Israel and its imperialist backers.

Israel presented its military action in Lebanon and its subsequent invasion in 1982 that led to the bombing and siege of Beirut, the expulsion of the PLO and the atrocities at Sabra and Shatilla, as a *defensive* reaction to Palestinian raids on her northern towns. But as the historical record shows, in reality, its "Operation Peace for Galilee" flowed inexorably from the logic of Zionist expansionism.

The Israeli invasion of the Lebanon in June 1982 was prepared through numerous provocations against the Palestinians and Lebanon designed to torpedo the 1981 Fahd Peace plan (named after the then Crown Prince and now King of Saudi Arabia). This plan recognised Israel's right to exist and called for a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 war. Such a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cut across Israel's plans, only partially implemented in the June 1967 war, to

expand its borders.

The Zionists had long had an interest in Lebanon, one of four small states carved out of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire by French imperialism in the aftermath of World War I. In 1938, Ben Gurion, who was to become Israel's first prime minister in 1948, envisaged a state of Israel that would include Southern Lebanon as far as the Litani River—an essential water supply. His perspective included an alliance with Lebanon's Christian Maronites, one of the many sectional groups encouraged by the French colonial regime to keep the region divided—despite the fact that many supported fascist Germany—as a bulwark against the Muslim Arab masses and Arab nationalism.

In the mid-1950s, the Israeli government considered the break-up of Lebanon, the establishment of a Christian state and the annexation of Southern Lebanon. Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, foreshadowing what was to happen in the late 1970s, argued that this could be achieved by winning over or bribing a military officer who would put himself at the head of the Maronites and provide the pretext for an Israeli invasion.

Israel shelved these plans in deference to France, the power broker in Lebanon, when the two countries joined with Britain in 1956 to invade Egypt and depose President Abdul Nasser, who had nationalised the Suez Canal and other interests belonging to the imperialist powers. Dayan's plans were to some extent realised in 1979 when Israel, in defiance of the UN, handed over Southern Lebanon, which it had captured after its invasion in 1978, to Major Saad Haddad, a deserter from the Lebanese army.

The June 1967 war was a turning point in Israel's history. The Zionist entity, one of four small states carved out of the former Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire and surrounded by hostile Arab neighbours, was unviable within its existing boundaries. Though the Labour government never openly declared this as its strategy, it seized the opportunity of a crisis provoked by Egypt to put into practice the armed forces' long held plans to extend Israel's borders throughout all of what was once British Mandate Palestine and part of Syria. Such "natural" boundaries would be easier to defend and gave Israel access to the river Jordan and its headwaters.

This "Greater Israel" policy spawned a new social layer—particularly among the Jewish settlers within the Occupied Territories—committed to this expansionist policy both ideologically and materially. For this layer, for whom General Ariel Sharon was later to become the spokesman, Lebanon was unfinished business.

At the same time, the war also created a new generation of Palestinian refugees who fled or were driven out by the IDF. Many went to Lebanon where there were already refugee camps dating back to 1948. Their numbers were further swelled after King Hussein of Jordan's murderous war against the Palestinians in 1970-71.

The June 1967 war also led to the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, as a mass movement committed to armed struggle in pursuit of a Palestinian state.

After the expulsion of the PLO leadership from Jordan in 1970, Beirut became not only the political, social and cultural heartland of the Palestinian movement, but also the PLO's military headquarters. Thus, Beirut also became an enemy stronghold, as far as Israel was concerned.

While Israel made much of the terrorist attacks on its own population, there was little reporting of its own scorched earth campaign between 1968 and 1974 against Lebanon. This was justified in terms of the need to defend Israel's northern settlements against Palestinian raids.

To cite but one example, the Palestinian terrorist attack at Ma'alot in May 1974 where 20 teenage youth were killed, was preceded by weeks of sustained Israeli phosphorous and napalm bombing of Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon resulting in the deaths of more than 300 people. Just two days before Ma'alot, an Israeli air attack on the village

of El-Kfeir in Lebanon had killed four civilians.

Israel's campaign was also aimed at undermining popular support for the Palestinians, sowing divisions between the Palestinians and Lebanese, and forcing the Lebanese government to suppress the PLO. Abba Eban, Israel's foreign minister from 1966 to 1974, said the government's policy was predicated upon the "*rational prospect*, ultimately fulfilled, that affected populations would exert pressure for the cessation of hostilities" (emphasis added).

The Lebanese army recorded over 3,000 violations of Lebanese territory by Israeli armed forces between 1968 and 1974, an average rate of 1.4 incidents per day. In 1974-75, this increased to seven incidents per day. During 1968-74, 880 Lebanese and Palestinians were killed in Israeli attacks. According to UN officials, 3,500 were killed in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan in Israeli air raids. While no separate figures exist for Palestinians, it was assumed that these must be at least twice as high as for the Lebanese.

By 1975, Israel had killed about 10 times as many Palestinians and Lebanese in cross border attacks as the total number of Israelis killed in Palestinian commando raids by 1982. Thousands of Palestinians were wounded and tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes in south Lebanon and move to the relative safety of Beirut and other cities. By the late 1970s, this figure had reached 250,000. The aim was to create a demilitarised zone in the south. To this end, 150 Palestinian camps and villages were virtually razed to the ground and olive groves and crops destroyed.

By the mid-1970s, Arafat's Fatah party, the dominant faction in the PLO, had adopted a "two state solution", advocating a mini-Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza that it hoped could be achieved by negotiations with Israel, and began to turn away from terrorist raids within Israel. This did not stop Israeli attacks on Lebanon, which actually increased. After 30 warplanes bombed and strafed Palestinian refugee camps and nearby villages, killing 57 people in December 1975, Israeli officials claimed their aim had been preventative, not punitive.

These attacks were aimed at torpedoing any attempt at reaching a solution to the long-running conflict that included a Palestinian state. Just two days earlier, despite angry objections by Israel, the UN Security Council had devoted a session to discussing an Arab initiative for a two-state settlement, thus paving the way for the PLO's participation in talks. The US vetoed the proposal. Far from preventing terrorism, the Israeli attacks were aimed at provoking a retaliatory response from the Palestinians and preventing any possibility of the UN agreeing to a Palestinian state.

The outbreak of the first phase (1975-76) of the Lebanese civil war expressed the unviability of the truncated state, riven as it was with divisions sown and encouraged by French imperialism as a means of preserving its influence and interests. In what was essentially a class war between the Palestinians and their Muslim allies against the reactionary Maronite Christian ruling elite, the Israeli government backed the various rival Christian Maronite militias—the perpetrators of the Tel al Zaatar and Khiyam massacres to name but two—as their proxies against the PLO and their Muslim allies. When it appeared that the Palestinian and Muslim forces might prevail, the Syrian army intervened to preserve the Lebanese state and the Maronite establishment.

In May 1977, Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud party came to power, ending nearly 30 years in which the Labour Party had dominated Israeli political life. Quite explicitly committed to a "Greater Israel" policy, Begin expanded the Israeli relationship with the Maronites, backing Pierre and Bashir Gamayel's Phalangists against rival parties.

Mossad, Israel's intelligence service, provided the Phalange with canons, mortar, tanks, communications equipment, mines and explosives. Mossad officers were placed within the Christian command, ostensibly to provide help with Israeli weaponry but in reality to provide intelligence

about the civil war and launch attacks against Palestinian strongholds in Lebanon. Later operations were to be extended against the Lebanese Shiites in southern Lebanon, who were then allied with the Palestinians. For the next five years, as the civil war waxed and waned in Lebanon with constantly shifting alliances, Israel continued to support the fascist Christian militia, to the tune of \$100 million a year.

In 1977, the Palestinians surrendered their heavy armaments under the first phase of the Shtaura agreement whereby the Lebanese government, Syria and the PLO imposed a freeze on cross-border raids by the Palestinians and attempted to resolve the civil war. The Israelis responded to this peace initiative by mounting a provocative and intensive bombing campaign in which 70 people, nearly all Lebanese, were killed. In addition, the Israeli-controlled Haddad militia in southern Lebanon launched an offensive with Israeli support aimed at disrupting the Lebanese government's plans to deploy its army in the south.

In March 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon in retaliation for a terrorist attack by Palestinian commandos, who had reached Israel by sea from Beirut and killed 34 Israelis. The bloody invasion led to the death of more than 2,000 people and drove more than 250,000 people from their homes in the south.

Israeli bombardment continued in 1979. The Lebanese government compiled a list showing the scale of Lebanese casualties alone. Nearly 100 Lebanese were killed or wounded in just one day in April, while nearly 1,000 were killed and 224 wounded between April and August.

The unexpected re-election of a Likud government with an increased majority in June 1981 brought a change in Prime Minister Begin's cabinet. General Ariel Sharon became minister of defence. As a young man Sharon had been in the Gadna, a paramilitary youth battalion, prior to joining the Haganah, the underground Jewish Defence Force and forerunner of the IDF.

After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Sharon led commando units that specialised in "behind the line" raids forcing Palestinians to flee their homes. His Unit 101 had attacked and killed 50 refugees in the El-Bureig refugee camp south of Gaza, then under Egyptian rule. Sharon first achieved notoriety in 1953 when, as commander of Unit 101, 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.

Sharon led other vicious attacks in Jordan in Gaza, which was then ruled by Egypt, and in 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.

In the 1973 war Sharon 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, as he disobeyed orders and cease-fire agreements.

In Begin's first Likud government, Sharon served as minister of agriculture, during which he championed the settlers' cause. "Grab more hills," he insisted. "Whatever is seized will be ours. Whatever isn't seized will end up in their hands". His goal was to create "facts on the ground" that would make it impossible to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians. Sharon had long espoused an expansionist policy that included Lebanon and his elevation to the cabinet clearly signified that Israel was about to step up the military campaign in Lebanon.

Sharon's priority, as he was later to explain, was "to solve the problem of Lebanon once and for all". He wanted Arafat and the PLO out of Lebanon, not just out of the south from where they were shelling Israeli settlements, but also out of Beirut. He also wanted the Syrians out of Lebanon. They had been invited into Lebanon in 1976, with the tacit agreement of Israel, to support the right-wing Phalangists and stop the break-up of the country. This was a major error of judgement as far as Sharon was concerned, as it had allowed the Syrians to take control of

Lebanon and thus prevent Israel from moving on Damascus via Lebanon. Lastly, he wanted a peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon.

According to Uri Avineri, the liberal Israeli journalist, Sharon had told him eight months before the invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 that he wanted to destroy the PLO in Lebanon, put the Phalangists in power, making Lebanon a kind of Christian protectorate, and get the Syrians out of Lebanon. He wanted to push the Palestinians into Syria in the hope that the Syrians would drive them down to Jordan, which would then be turned into a Palestinian state.

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