

*Avi Shlaim*

## Ariel Sharon's War against the Palestinians

by  
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**F**or Ariel Sharon diplomacy, to invert the famous saying by Karl von Clausewitz, is the extension of war by other means. The burly, 76-year old Israeli leader has had a chequered career as a soldier and a politician but he has never thought of himself as a diplomat. The title Sharon chose for his autobiography aptly sums him up in one word—Warrior. Bargaining, accommodation, and compromise are alien to his whole way of thinking. This makes Sharon unsuited, both by temperament and by conviction, to the task of peace-making. In a peace process, unlike war, you cannot have a winner and a loser. The resolution of a conflict requires two winners. Sharon, on the other hand, views the relations with the Palestinians as a zero-sum game where a gain by one side is necessarily at the expense of the other. And he is hell-bent on always being the winner. President George W. Bush once described Sharon as “a man of peace.” But this is about as accurate as describe Sharon as a slim and handsome young man.

Sharon is a man of war through and through and he perceives the Palestinians not as a partner on the road to peace but as Israel's principal enemy. The roots of Sharon's thinking about the Palestinians go back to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the spiritual father of the Israeli right. In 1923 Jabotinsky published an article entitled “On the Iron Wall (We and the Arabs).” He argued that Arab nationalists were bound to oppose the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Consequently, a voluntary agreement between the two sides was unattainable. The only way to realize the Zionist project was behind an iron wall of Jewish military strength. In other words, the Zionist project could only be implemented unilaterally and by military force.

The crux of Jabotinsky's strategy was to enable the Zionist movement to deal with its local opponents from a position of unassailable strength. The iron wall was not an end in itself but a means to an end. It was intended to compel the Arabs to abandon any hope of destroying the Jewish state. Despair was expected to promote pragmatism on the other side and thus to prepare the ground for the second stage of the strategy: negotiations with the

local Arabs about their status and national rights in Palestine. In other words, Jewish military strength was to pave the way to a political settlement with the Palestinian national movement which laid a claim to the whole of Palestine.

The key phrase here is “iron wall.” It accurately describes the basic Zionist strategy in the conflict with the neighboring Arab states since Israel was established in 1948. It also provides the title of my book *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. In the book I argue that the history of the State of Israel is a vindication of the strategy of the iron wall. The Arabs—first the Egyptians, then the Palestinians, then the Jordanians—learnt the hard way that Israel could not be defeated on the battlefield and were compelled to negotiate with it from a position of palpable weakness.

THE 1993 OSLO ACCORD BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE PLO WAS a major turning-point in the 100-year old history of the conflict over Palestine. It marked the transition from the first to the second stage of the iron wall strategy, the transition from deterrence to negotiations and compromise. The Palestinians believed that by signing the Oslo accord and thereby giving up their claim to 78% of pre-1948 Palestine, they would gradually gain an independent state stretching over the Gaza Strip and most of the West Bank with a capital in East Jerusalem. They had moderated their political program very considerably in the way that Jabotinsky had predicted in his extraordinarily prescient article. But what the Oslo accord produced in practice was not the partition of Palestine but a persistent political deadlock. Ten years on, the Palestinians are bitterly disappointed with the results of the historic compromise which they struck on the lawn of the White House with the leaders of the Jewish state. The Oslo peace process broke down in the summer of 2000 and the dream of independence and statehood remain just that—a dream. Having made the peace of the brave, the Palestinians confront an Israeli prime minister who is determined to impose on them the peace of the bully.

Ariel Sharon has been involved at the sharp end of the confrontation with the Arabs for most of his life. The hallmarks of his career are mendacity, the most savage brutality towards Arab civilians, and a persistent preference for force over diplomacy to solve political problems. After making the transition from the army into politics, Sharon remained the champion of violent solutions. His ideology is the Likud ideology of Greater Israel that claims the whole of the West Bank as an integral part of the Land of Israel. This ideology leaves

no room for an independent Palestinian state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

In the past, Sharon used to seek a solution to the Palestinian problem at the expense of Jordan, half of whose population is of Palestinian origin. Sharon was in fact one of the most consistent proponents of the Likud policy and the slogan that “Jordan is Palestine.” This policy denied the need to create a new Palestinian state on the West Bank of the river Jordan by claiming that a Palestinian state in all but name already existed on the East Bank of the river. Consequently, the solution lay in helping the PLO to transform the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan into the Republic of Palestine. During the crisis in Jordan in September 1970, Ariel Sharon was the only member of the IDF General Staff who was opposed to the policy of helping King Hussein to beat off the challenge from the PLO. After the signature of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan in October 1994, the Likud finally abandoned the policy that “Jordan is Palestine.” Sharon himself may have realized that this policy is no longer realistic but his failure to renounce it openly suggests that it may still be lurking at the back of his mind.

In and out of uniform, Ariel Sharon has waged a relentless war against the Palestinian people. This is the theme of Baruch Kimmerling’s informative and illuminating recent book *Politicide: Ariel Sharon’s War Against the Palestinians*. Kimmerling defines politicicide as “a process that has, as its ultimate goal, the dissolution of the Palestinians’ existence as a legitimate social, political, and economic entity. This process may also but not necessarily entail their partial or complete ethnic cleansing from the territory known as the Land of Israel.” Kimmerling regards Sharon as the most brutal, deceitful, and unrestrained of all Israeli generals and politicians and as one of the most frightening leaders of the new millennium. The book is a devastating indictment of Sharon’s attempts to destroy the Palestinian people, including the proposal to forcibly turn Jordan into a Palestinian state and the infamous invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

As minister of defence in Menachem Begin’s government Sharon was the driving force behind the invasion of Lebanon which was fraudulently named “Operation Peace for Galilee.” This was not a defensive war to safeguard Israel’s security but an offensive war designed to reshape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The principal objective of Sharon’s war was to destroy the PLO as a military and political organization, to break the backbone of Palestinian nationalism, to spread despair and despondency

among the inhabitants of the West Bank, and to pave the way to its absorption into Greater Israel. A second objective was to give Israel's Maronite allies a leg-up to power, and then compel them to sign a peace treaty with Israel. A third objective was to defeat and expel the Syrian army from Lebanon and to make Israel the dominant power in the Levant. Under Sharon's devious direction, an operation that was supposedly undertaken in self-defence developed into a merciless siege of Beirut and culminated in a horrendous massacre in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila which led to the removal of Sharon from his post at the ministry of defence.

If brute military force is Sharon's principal instrument in dealing with the Palestinian people, the building of Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian territory is another project that has always been close to his heart—if he has one. Here he was acting in the best Zionist tradition of “creating facts on the ground” to pre-empt negotiations. In various capacities—as minister of agriculture, as minister without portfolio, as minister of industry and trade, as minister of housing and construction, as minister of national infrastructure, and as minister of foreign affairs—Sharon spurned diplomatic compromise and pushed for confiscating more and more Arab land, for building more and more Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and for the expansion of existing settlements. It was not for nothing that he was nick-named “the bulldozer.” The settlements were a manifestation of Sharon's territorial expansionism, an example of his general preference for unilateral action, and a way of preventing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Whereas Labor-led governments tended to construct settlements in areas of strategic importance to Israel, the Likud, and Ariel Sharon in particular, deliberately scattered settlements across the length and breadth of Judea and Samaria—the Biblical names for the West Bank—in order to render territorial compromise impossible when the Labor Party returned to power.

Labor did return to power in 1992 and the following year Itzhak Rabin signed the Oslo accord with Yasser Arafat. The Likud rejected the Oslo accord from the beginning as incompatible with Israel's security and with its historic right to the whole Land of Israel. Binyamin Netanyahu spent his three years in power (1996-1999) in a largely successful attempt to delay, to subvert, and ultimately to derail the Oslo peace process. It was Labor's Ehud Barak, however, who presided over the breakdown of the process at the Camp David summit in July 2000. With the collapse of the summit, the countdown to the return to violence began. Ariel Sharon, Netanyahu's

successor as leader of the Likud, provided the spark that set off the conflagration with his provocative visit to Haram al-Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem on 28 September 2000.

Palestinian riots quickly evolved into a full-scale uprising, the Al-Aqsa intifada, paving the way to Ariel Sharon's decisive electoral victory against Ehud Barak on 6 February 2001. Israel was at war and no Israeli leader was more efficient or more ruthless in fighting the Palestinians than this old war-horse. During the election campaign the wily Sharon tried to reinvent himself as a man of peace. He ran on a ticket of "peace with security." But it was the same old Sharon who had not mellowed with age and who did not appear to have learnt any lessons from his ill-conceived and ill-fated war in Lebanon. Sharon's rise to power thus immediately extinguished any faint light there might have been at the end of the tunnel.

With Sharon ensconced in the prime minister's office, Israel was back to the old strategy of the iron wall with a vengeance. Ze'ev Jabotinsky had outlined a sophisticated strategy of change in which Jewish military power was designed to pave the way to negotiations from strength. Sharon, like most politicians of the Right, is dedicated to building up his country's military power but is rather reluctant to engage in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. His strategy is to use Israel's overwhelming military power in order to impose his terms on the opponent. Small wonder that in the three years since Likud's victory at the polls, final status negotiations with the Palestinian Authority have not been resumed. The persistence of Palestinian violence against Israeli civilians, especially in the terrifying form of suicide bombings, is Sharon's excuse for refusing to resume political negotiations. The deeper reasons lie in his psychological make-up, his worldview, and the ideology of Greater Israel. One does not negotiate about a nationalist ideology. All nationalist isms eventually lead to war and right-wing Zionism is no exception.

Ariel Sharon is the unilateralist *par excellence*. This is reflected across the entire spectrum of his government's policies from the destruction of Palestinian houses to the targeted killing of militant Palestinian leaders, from expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank to the construction of an elaborate network of by-pass roads for the exclusive use of the settlers, from habitual violation of UN resolutions to the systematic abuse of international humanitarian law. Arab peace offers are treated with indifference verging on contempt. In late March 2002, for example, all 22 members of the Arab

League endorsed a Saudi plan that offered Israel peace and normalisation in return for withdrawal from the territories it occupied in June 1967. Sharon's response amounted to a declaration of war. He launched the fraudulently-named "Operation Defensive Shield" which seriously damaged the PA's capacity to govern and destroyed much of the civilian infrastructure that had been built with foreign aid. On the belligerent prime minister's orders, the IDF marched into the Palestinian part of West Bank and waged against its people a savage war which included the reoccupation of cities, the bombardment of refugee camps, the demolition of houses, attacks on medical facilities, the rounding up of hundreds of suspects, torture, and summary executions.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Sharon government's policy is the construction of the so-called "security barrier" or wall on the West Bank. This wall is higher than the Berlin Wall, it winds its way round the main Jewish settlement blocks, and it is a flagrant violation of international law.

The purpose of this wall is said to be to prevent terrorist attacks on Israel, but the hidden motives behind it have as much to do with land-grabbing as with security. To build the wall Israel is expropriating land, demolishing houses, separating farmers from their fields, workers from their place of work, school children from their schools, and entire communities from their sources of water. The wall bites deep into the West Bank with the apparent aim of crowding as many Palestinians as possible into as little territory as possible. Estimate of the area of the West Bank that this wall will gobble up by the time it is completed range from 15 to 55 per cent. What is clear is that the wall is paving the way to the de facto annexation of a substantial part of the West Bank to Israel thereby undermining the possibility of a genuine two-state solution. For Ze'ev Jabotinsky the strategy of the "Iron Wall," was a metaphor for dealing with the Arabs from a position of unassailable strength. In the crude hands of Ariel Sharon and his associates, however, this metaphor is fast becoming a hideous and horrendous concrete reality and an environmental catastrophe.

In an effort to breathe some life into the comatose Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Tony Blair took the lead in persuading the Quartet to issue "the road map". George Bush was not an enthusiast of the road map: he adopted it under pressure from his allies. The road map was formally launched by the Quartet in May of last year. It envisaged three phases leading to an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel by 2005. The Palestinians

embraced the roadmap with great alacrity though they found it difficult to come up with a credible security plan due to the death and destruction visited upon them by “Operation Defensive Shield”. The Israeli position was more ambiguous. Ariel Sharon requested and received from President Bush three delays in launching the road map, and once it was launched, he submitted fourteen amendments that were designed to empty it of any serious political content. The Israeli Cabinet never endorsed the road map as such; it only voted for specific measures that were required of Israel in the first phase. There was also some outright opposition to the road map from ministers who are well to the right of Ariel Sharon.

The policies of the Israeli government did not change significantly following this half-hearted adoption of the road map. It continued to order IDF incursions into the Palestinian territories, targeted assassinations of Palestinian militants, demolition of houses, uprooting of trees, curfews, restrictions, and the deliberate inflicting of misery, hunger, and hardship to encourage Arab migration from the West Bank. At the same time, settlement activity continued on the West Bank under the guise of ‘natural growth’ but in blatant violation of the provisions of the road map.

The failure of all official plans to break the deadlock on the Israeli-Palestinian front encouraged private individuals and groups from both sides of the divide to come forward with fresh ideas. Sari Nusseibeh and Ami Ayalon obtained more than 300,000 signatures for their blueprint for the resolution of the conflict. Yasser Abed Rabbo and Yossi Beilin signed a “peace agreement” between Palestine and Israel in Geneva on 1 December 2003 amid great media and political fanfare. The Geneva Accord is a 50-page document that deals in detail with all aspects of the dispute. Funded and sponsored by the Swiss government, it was enthusiastically received all over the world. Predictably, however, it incurred the wrath of Ariel Sharon who denounced Yossi Beilin as a traitor. Ever the soldier, Sharon acted on the precept that the best line of defence is to attack. Sharon’s central contention all along was that there is no Palestinian peace partner. The Geneva Accord demonstrated not only that there was a significant body of moderate Palestinians who were prepared to negotiate with Israel a final settlement to the conflict but that they had already done most of the ground work.

At length Sharon reached the conclusion that the occupation in its present form is unsustainable and he began to look for ways of distancing Israel from the main Palestinians population centres while keeping as much of their land

as possible. The plan he came up with is not a peace plan but a plan for a unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip and four isolated settlements on the West Bank. Characteristically, the plan ignored Palestinian rights and interests and it was not even presented to Palestinian Authority as a basis for negotiations because it would have been rejected out of hand. To the world Sharon presented the plan as a contribution to the road map and to the building of peace based on a two-state solution. But to his right-wing supporters he said: "My plan is difficult for the Palestinians, a fatal blow. There's no Palestinian state in a unilateral move." The real purpose behind the plan is to sweep away the remnants of Oslo, to undermine the position of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, and to derail the road map. Anchored in a fundamental rejection of the Palestinian national identity, the plan is a pitch for politicide, an attempt to deny the Palestinian people an independent political existence on their land.

By-passing the Palestinians, the Quartet, the UN, and the international community, Sharon presented his plan to the only person who counts in his eyes: the President of the United States. As a reward for the offer to pull the 7,500 settlers out of the Gaza Strip, Sharon requested Mr. Bush's support for retaining the six major Jewish settlement blocks, holding 92,000 people, on the West Bank. Indeed, in a remarkable exercise in brinkmanship or blackmail, Sharon threatened not to board the aircraft at Ben-Gurion airport until his demands were satisfied. At their meeting at the White House on April 14<sup>th</sup> the president granted his guest everything he had asked for and more. Hailing Sharon's plan as a "a bold and historic initiative" and as a true contribution to building peace in the region, Mr Bush proceeded to give the most right-wing prime minister in Israel's history two specific assurances. First, Bush promised American support for Israel's retention of choice parts of the West Bank. Second, he rejected the right of return of the 1948 refugees and said that in future they and their families should immigrate to a new Palestinian state. Sharon asked for these assurances in writing and he received them in writing. Taken together, these two assurances amounted to an abrupt reversal of American policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, since 1967. They also destroyed irrevocably any residual credibility that the Bush administration may have had to serve as an honest broker in the resolution of this conflict.

Arab reactions to the Sharon-Bush pact were instantaneous and incandescent with rage. There was a universal feeling that by embracing the Likud's one-sided nationalist agenda, Bush sounded the death knell of the peace process.

Yasser Arafat labelled Bush's statements "a new Balfour Declaration," alluding to Britain's infamous 1917 promise to support the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. King Abdullah II of Jordan cancelled a scheduled meeting with Mr. Bush on account of the statements he made during the prime minister's visit. Given Sharon's record as a proponent of the thesis that "Jordan is Palestine," the king had every reason to dissociate himself from an accord over which he was not consulted and which could end up by destabilising his own kingdom through an influx of Palestinians from the West Bank to the East Bank. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt said that there is more hatred of Americans in the Arab world today than ever before. The Organisation of Islamic Conferences also condemned Washington for its support of Israel's unilateral initiative. To many Muslims as well as Arabs, the Sharon-Bush collusion is deeply offensive and it is bound to trigger violent reactions.

Meanwhile, Ariel Sharon, the champion of violent solutions, can congratulate himself on a spectacular victory. Virtually single-handed, he brought about a seismic change in America's position, a change that could redefine the conflict for a generation or more. He persuaded the most powerful man in the world to back his plan to consolidate Israel's grip in the West Bank and to unilaterally draw the borders of an emasculated Palestinian state. Sharon can use this backing to overcome right-wing opposition to his Gaza disengagement plan from right-wing elements in the government and the ruling party and to hang on to power despite the three separate charges of corruption pending against him and his two sons. As for George W. Bush, his sudden and ill-considered conversion to Sharon's expansionist agenda is largely motivated by political expediency: blind support for Israel will go down well in the upcoming presidential elections not only with Jewish voters but with the much more substantial constituency of Christian fundamentalists. The tragedy is that Bush and Sharon, in trying to protect their domestic power base, are endangering the future of Israel, the Palestinians, and the entire Middle East.

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