

The Arab reaction

The Arab street saw Sharon as brutal and bloodthirsty, but among some decision makers there was a grudging appreciation of Israel's strongman

By Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

ARIEL SHARON may have been a complex personality whose mixed legacy for Israel will be debated for years to come. But the Palestinian and Arab publics' view of Sharon was almost entirely monochromatic. For them, Sharon personified their gut-level understanding of the Zionist project and the State of Israel: a brutal, bloodthirsty, expansionist entity, which trampled on Palestinian rights and had no regard for Arab lives, which believed in, and lived by, the sword.

Nevertheless, among decision makers and even beyond, one would sometimes hear a grudging appreciation of Sharon "the bulldozer," an Israeli version of the "big man" deemed so central for leadership of Arab societies, someone who could get things done.

Former Egyptian war minister Kamal Hasan Ali once told the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth's Smadar Peri that he actually admired Sharon, particularly for his military prowess. "It's the enemy that we learn to respect, suspect and deal with." Similarly, leaders like Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas recognized Sharon's pragmatic streak and ability to implement hard decisions during his years as prime minister and negotiated with him accordingly, even while remaining skeptical regarding his ultimate intentions. The Jordanians, in particular, were fully cognizant of Sharon's previously held dictum that "Jordan is Palestine," but acknowledged that his position had evolved.

The responses to Sharon's death duly reflected these views. Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon publicly rejoiced at the end of the "butcher of Beirut," passing out sweets to passersby. It was an especially poignant moment for Palestinian and Lebanese residents of Sabra and Shatila camps in west Beirut, where many hundreds of civilians had been massacred by Israel's Lebanese Christian Phalange ally in September 1982, for which then-defense minister Sharon was held "indirectly responsible" by Israel's Kahan Commission and forced to resign his post. While celebrating Sharon's demise, they regretted that Sharon had not been brought to justice. One woman interviewed consoled herself that "the tribunal of God is more severe" than any earthly justice system.

Social media lit up with Arab responses to Sharon's death. For example, the Twitter hashtag "RIH [Rest in Hell] Sharon" served as a convenient site for anti-Sharon screeds: "RIH Blood-sucker Sharon," posted by an Egyptian, was typical. Interestingly, a London-based Iraqi Shi'i sarcastically tweeted his "deepest condolences" to Saudi King Abdullah "for the loss of his dear friend Ariel Sharon." Not surprisingly, Hamas and Hezbollah spokesmen were quick to celebrate. "Our people today feel extreme happiness at the death and departure of this criminal... [and] we have become more confident in victory with the departure of this tyrant," said Hamas's Sami Abu Zurhi.

Fatah's Jibril Rajoub told Israeli television viewers (in Hebrew) that he regretted that Sharon had not been tried by the International Criminal Court for his crimes. The Palestinian news agency Maan



Khan Yunis, Gaza, residents hand out sweets January 11, as they celebrate the passing of Ariel Sharon

issued a lengthy obituary emphasizing Sharon's efforts "to take over Arab-owned lands and give them to Jews" and the brutality of the 1982 Lebanon war. By contrast, the Palestinian Authority and the Jordanian and Egyptian authorities generally refrained from comment.

Among prominent Palestinian commentators addressing Western audiences, Rashid Khalidi (Columbia University), Yousef Munnayer (Jerusalem Fund/Palestine Center) and Rami Khouri (Issam Fares Institute, American University of Beirut) all stressed the long-term damage done by Sharon. For Khalidi, aside from the destruction wreaked by Sharon on Beirut in 1982, his tireless promotion of settlements and ready employment of violence had put paid to the prospects of a two-state solution. Similarly, Munnayer held that Sharon's legacy was as a destroyer of peace, and that the Gaza withdrawal was not an indication that he had changed his fundamental positions. Khouri challenged Israelis to look at where Sharon's actions had brought them: shepherded them into "an ugly corner where they are indicted and sanctioned for war crimes and other terrible deeds, and daily equated with South African apartheid."

The commentary by Hussein Ibish (American Task Force on Palestine) stood apart from the others. Sharon's complex legacy, he said, was not sufficiently understood by Arabs. This "notorious practitioner" of "gun Zionism" showed that Israel was capable of overriding the settler movement in the greater national interest, but also that if it does so unilaterally, it will be a dead end."

What would have happened had Sharon lived is anyone's guess. But it's hard to imagine Sharon's legacy in the Arab world being substantially modified. ■

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