

Ariel Sharon
A political profile
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General Ariel Sharon and the most extreme, fanatical and fundamentalist groups are at the centre stage of Israel's public life. Elected as prime minister of Israel at the age of 73, Sharon is one of the most hawkish and controversial politicians in Israel.

With his invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when he was defence minister (where nearly 2,000 Palestinian refugees were massacred with active Israeli assistance), and his accelerated building of settlement projects in the occupied territories throughout the Likud tenure of office in the 1980s and 1990s, he has managed to become simultaneously one of the most popular figures among the Israeli right and the most deeply hated among Palestinians and Arabs. Unless Sharon abdicates a large number of the opinions, beliefs and symbols that he has embraced for decades, there can be no doubt that he will lead Israel into a full-frontal collision, not just with the Palestinians, but with the entire Arab world.

The following will provide a political profile of Sharon, focusing on his military and political careers, his blood-tainted past, his hard-line political views and maximalist aims and objectives.

Biographical details

Ariel Sharon was born 1928 in Kfar Malal in the central coastal valley, 10 miles from Jaffa. Kfar Malal was one of the first Zionist Moshav (agrarian community) to be established in Mandated Palestine. His original family name was Scheinerman, but was later changed to Sharon.

Sharon occupies an Arab property in the Old City of Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter and flies a large Israeli flag and Menorah atop his requisitioned home in the Old City which is constantly guarded by Israeli troops. He is Israel's wealthiest cattle farmer; since 1973 he has run the largest privately-owned ranch in Israel, located in the northern Negev.

Education

Graduated from high school in Tel Aviv. Subjects studied: agriculture, politics and military affairs.

1952-53 - Studied History and Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

1957-58 - Studies at Camberley Staff College in the United Kingdom.

1966 - Completed a Law degree at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Family status

Remarried in 1963 after his first wife died in a fatal car crash. Sharon has three sons; one was killed in a shooting accident.

Character

Sharon is generally considered as a man who has no limits and uses power ruthlessly. He shows unlimited ambition and disrespect for the law; and is given to open displays of physical power. Some Israelis refer to his unstable, overweening and impulsive character. A single motif recurs throughout his military and political life: always escalate. Having reached the supreme position in Israel, at least some Israeli must be wondering about the fate of country's political system.

Something in the rhetoric of all of Israel's right-wing prime ministers, from Menahem Begin to Sharon, has continued to be that of opposition, of dissent against some kind of lawful (Zionist) regime, even when they themselves are the regime. This is particularly the case with Sharon, who has operated for much of his life from the position of the oppositionist, even when he was a cabinet minister. He always challenged the authority of his superiors, both in the army and in government. A large part of his military and political careers was done while circumventing authority, disobeying orders, inciting against his leader, and even - as in the case of the invasion of Lebanon - deceiving his superior in government (Menahem Begin) on the question of reaching Beirut.

Military career

1942 - Joined Gadna', a paramilitary youth battalion., at the age of 14. During his high school years he was a member of Haganah, the mainstream underground Zionist para-military force in Palestine.

1945 - Enrolled in officers training course.

1947 - Worked as instructor of Haganah police units designed to protect farming settlements.

1948 - At the beginning of the first Arab-Israeli war, Sharon was promoted to platoon commander of the Alexandroni Brigade.

1949 - Enlisted as a military intelligence officer in Israel's armed forces. In this capacity he was assigned the Northern Command, where he gathered information on Palestinian guerrillas in Syria and Lebanon.

1952-53 - Recruited to lead commando raids into Jordanian-held West Bank territory in retaliation for Palestinian attacks against Israeli settlements in the Jerusalem area. He led special commando "Unit 101", an elite unit dedicated to leading retaliatory strikes against the Palestinian fedayeen [guerrillas] infiltrating Israel from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

1956 - During the 1956 Arab-Israeli war, he served as commander of a parachute brigade. His troops captured the strategic Mitla Pass in the Sinai peninsula. But his breach of military discipline during this war angered the army command, and his advancement in the army ranks was suspended for years.

1962 - Promoted to commander of the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] armoured corps.

1964 - Appointed head of the Northern Command Staff.

1966 - Appointed head of army training.

1967 - Promoted to major-general. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli war Sharon commanded the Egyptian front and directed a battle which ended with the capture of the Mitla Pass and the corridor to the Suez canal.

1969 - Appointed chief of the Southern Command Staff.

1972 - Considering his chances of being appointed chief of staff to be slim, Sharon resigned from the army in June 1972.

1973 - During the October war Sharon was recalled to military service and commanded the Sinai front. Resigned from the army to pursue a career in politics.

Political career

1973 December - Sharon was elected to the Knesset [parliament] for the Likud bloc, although he had no strong party affiliations.

1973-74 - Served as Member of the Knesset within the Likud bloc, which consisted of the Gahal, the Independent Liberals and Hamerkaz Hahofshi (The Free Centre) parties.

1974 December - Resigned from the Knesset and left Likud to become, from 1975 to 1977, special security adviser to Labour Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

1976 - Formed a new party, Shlomtzion (Peace of Zion), which gained two seats in the 1977 elections. The party disappeared shortly afterwards, upon which Sharon joined the Likud again.

1977-81 - Served as minister of agriculture and chairman of the Ministerial Committee for Settlement. Although he was never religious, he supported the Gush Emunim settlements movement and was thus viewed as the patron of the messianic settlers movement. He used his position to encourage the establishment of a dense network of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and contested the possibility of the return of these territories to Arab sovereignty. During this period Sharon doubled the number of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

1981-83 - Served as defence minister in the second Begin government and masterminded Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. An official Commission of Inquiry (the Kahan Commission) found him "indirectly responsible" for the massacres perpetrated in the Palestinian refugee camps

of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982. The commission called for his resignation. He resigned from his post in 1983 but remained minister without portfolio until 1984.

1984-90 - In the National Unity Government of 1984, Labour Prime Minister Shimon Peres appointed him minister of trade and industry. Sharon served in this capacity until May 1990 but then resigned in the same year in opposition to the "Madrid peace process" being pursued by the then Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir under American pressure.

1990-92 - Served as minister for construction and housing. Sharon encouraged the development of settlements along "Green Line" with the West Bank, particularly to house Soviet immigrants.

1992 June - Likud was defeated in the elections by Yitzhak Rabin's Labour Party.

1992-96 June - Served as member of the influential Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and as chairman of the committee overseeing Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union.

1996 - Appointed minister of national infrastructure in the Likud government of Binyamin Netanyahu - a post especially created for him.

1998 October - Appointed foreign minister under Binyamin Netanyahu. His appointment placated extreme right wingers crucial to Netanyahu's coalition.

1999 September - Following the resignation of Netanyahu as leader of the Likud bloc after his failure in the election of 17 May 1999, Sharon was installed as the bloc's interim chairman. He was elected as chairman of the Likud bloc on 2 September 1999.

2001 6 February - Elected as prime minister.

The "Iron Wall" doctrine and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon

There is no indication that Sharon has become a reformed character. He remains faithful to Vladimir Jabotinsky's concept of an "Iron Wall" of

Jewish military might which would secure the maximalist Zionist goal of Greater Israel and effectively impose Israeli hegemony on the Middle East. As defence minister, he masterminded the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, a typical example of the "Iron Wall" mentality. On 6 June 1982, a massive expeditionary force began the long-planned and expected invasion, "Operation Peace for Galilee", with the aim of rearranging the Middle East map to suit Israel's interests. Sharon's attempt to delegitimize the Palestine Liberation Organization by branding it a "terrorist organization" and his attempt to destroy the PLO in order to facilitate the absorption of the West Bank and Gaza into Israel were central to his initiation of the invasion of Lebanon. Likud Prime Minister Menahem Begin did endorse the "big idea", while leaving the details to his defence minister, allowing the latter to develop the war into catastrophic proportions, resulting in the death of some 20,000 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians and over 600 Israeli soldiers. Begin and Sharon shared the same dream: Sharon was the dream's hatchet man. That dream was to annihilate the PLO, douse any vestiges of Palestinian nationalism, crush local Palestinians leaders in the West Bank and Gaza, and eventually force the Palestinian there into Jordan and cripple, if not end, the Palestinian nationalist movement. That, for Sharon and Begin, was the ultimate purpose of the Lebanese war.

With a fragmented and dispersed PLO, Sharon envisaged that the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza - deprived of outside moral support - would come to accept permanent Israeli control there, in a situation in which much of the Palestinian population could be induced or gradually coerced to migrate across the Jordan river into Jordan. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon was designed to break any final resistance to total Israeli control and to pave the way for making life so difficult for those who valued their freedom and political self-expression that they would eventually leave for Jordan. But the invasion of Lebanon dragged Israel deeper and deeper into a very costly and profitless war, which lasted for 18 years. It ended with a humiliating and hurried withdrawal of the Israeli army in 2000.

Blood-tainted past

Sharon is a man with personal history of brutalizing and dispossessing Palestinians which goes back to the early 1950s. But for many people

Sharon will always be closely associated with the massacres of **Sabra and Shatila** in September 1982. In 1982 Sharon sent the Israeli army all the way to Beirut, with the aim of driving out the PLO from Lebanon. The move also resulted in the massacres of nearly 2,000 Palestinians by Lebanese Phalange militiamen in two Beirut refugee camps then under Israeli control. Sharon was removed from office in 1983 by the Kahan Commission investigating the massacres, after it found him "indirectly responsible" for the killings. But he remained a popular figure among the Israeli right.

The inhabitants of the Palestinian village of **Qibya** in the West Bank certainly think they know Sharon. It was mid-October 1953 and within eight hours most of the village became rubble. Israeli special forces of "Unit 101" dynamited much of the village and killed 69 people. Their commander was Sharon and the dawn attack on the village was a typical Sharon operation. It was thorough, violent and ruthless, attention-grabbing and deeply controversial, even in Israel. Sharon's orders were to blow up some public buildings and some houses to make a point. But Sharon had equipped his men with 600 kilograms of explosives and was determined to use them. In all, nearly 50 houses were destroyed. Most villagers died when their buildings were blown up.

Two years later, in March 1955, members of the Negev's **Azazmeh tribe**, including women and children, suffered a massacre at the hands of "Unit 101". The notorious "Unit 101" had been created by army Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan in 1953. Commanded by Sharon and patronized in particular by Prime Minister [David] Ben-Gurion, "Unit 101" was considered the "bayonet" of the army and carried out numerous raids against Arab targets across the border. The tactics used by the unit were debated widely in Israel. Its atrocities against bedouin tribes in the Negev in the mid-1950s was described in the daily *Haaretz* in November 1959:

The army's desert patrols would turn up in the midst of a bedouin encampment day after day, dispersing it with a sudden burst of machine-gun fire until the sons of the desert were broken and, gathering what little was left of their belongings, led their camels in long silent strings into the heart of the Sinai desert.

Two other little known massacres from Sharon's early career have resurfaced recently. Earlier in 1953 Sharon led another retaliatory raid

against an Egyptian-run refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Interviews with participants reveal that even some of his own soldiers were uneasy at his ruthlessness and objected to the plan. But the attack went ahead and 15 Palestinian civilians were killed. Another operation in the early 1950s involved an ambush of Palestinian women who were crossing Israel's border to get water from a village near Jerusalem.

Sharon's supporters in Israel dismiss such ruthless raids as "ancient history", but Sharon's style has changed little from his first operations in the 1950s to the debacle and massacres of Lebanon in 1982. Sharon's motto has always been the same: always escalate.

Political views

I. Greater Israel

Sharon believes in "Eretz Yisrael Hashlema" (the "whole Land of Israel") and strongly supports the annexation of the occupied territories. Known to be one of the more hawkish in the Likud bloc, he always proposed radical schemes for "solving the Palestinian problem", like the annexation of most of the West Bank.

After 1977, Sharon served in all Likud governments, which moved fast towards settling the West Bank and Gaza and unilaterally annexed the [Syrian] Golan Heights. Already during the first Likud government the Knesset had passed a law prohibiting the evacuation of any Jewish settlement from the West Bank and Gaza, which was tantamount to de facto annexation. As prime minister, Sharon will stick to the Likud bloc manifesto:

The right of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisrael is eternal and indisputable, and linked to our right to security and peace. The state of Israel has a right and a claim to sovereignty over Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. In time, Israel will invoke this claim and strive to realize it. Any plan involving the handover of parts of western Eretz Yisrael to foreign rule, as proposed by the Labour coalition, denies our right to this country.

Under Sharon's premiership the Israeli government might not call for legal comprehensive annexation of the West Bank and Gaza. Instead, the formula of de facto, creeping annexation, which would enable Israel to

settle the land, while restricting the Palestinian inhabitants to ever-shrinking enclaves (or Bantustans) run by the Palestinian National Authority, will be pursued by Sharon. Outright, comprehensive legal annexation, on the other hand, would sharply raise the question of citizenship for the residents of the West Bank, while a de facto, creeping annexation combined with strict physical separations between the Palestinian National Authority's enclaves and Jewish settlements would be widely supported in Israel.

II. Settlement and seizure of Palestinian land

After September 1977, Sharon set out to implement a "master plan" to settle one million Jews in the West Bank and Gaza Strip within 20 years. "I believe that if we establish these settlements, we will feel sufficiently secure to accept risks for the sake of peace," Sharon declared. Under the Likud administrations Palestinians were subjected to a colonial policy designed to encourage emigration. Drastic demographic changes were also introduced.

To fulfil its settlement goals, the Likud government rapidly increased the number of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Though the Likud government cited security arguments in defence of its settlement policies, it is clear that the Likud's position was founded on the abstract, uncompromising ideological claim of the "whole Land of Israel" for the "Jewish people".

To all intents and purposes, the settlement policies of the fundamentalist Gush Emunim movement and of the Israeli state had become one and the same after the rise to power of Begin and Sharon. Sharon, who had used the "iron fist" to smash Palestinian resistance in Gaza in 1970 and to evict, ruthlessly, thousands of the Arab inhabitants of the Rafah salient from their homes around the same time, believed that the blitzkrieg strategies he had employed on the battlefield could be applied to the political and demographic problems of the West Bank and Gaza. Sharon tried to thin out the Arab population of the territories "by a variety of measures which will fall short of forcible deportation or open atrocities".

While the colonization of the occupied territories vastly increased the

tensions between settlers and the Palestinians, economic migration has, in part, been precipitated by the seizure of Arab land. "The seizure of Arab land does not increase friction with the Arab population," Sharon argued, "it will prevent such friction in the future."

From 1977 until the end of the Likud's second term in August 1984, two Likud governments poured more than \$1 billion into Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and into various support activities. By August 1984, some 113 settlements were spread over the entire West Bank, including half a dozen sizeable towns. By 1990 the Jewish population of the West Bank settlements had grown to 140,000 (excluding expanded East Jerusalem). Today, nearly 200,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank, with a similar number in Arab East Jerusalem.

However, the number of settlers in the Gaza Strip has remained relatively small. Up to 1987, only 2,500 Jewish settlers resided in the Gaza Strip and by 1993 this number reached 3,810. In the Syrian Golan Heights, at least 40 settlements were established. Sweeping land confiscation and zone restrictions were implemented to provide a land reserve for current and future Jewish settlement.

The increase in the number of Jewish settlers' areas was intentionally planned by the Likud to make it difficult for future Israeli governments to remove the settlements in any future agreements with the Palestinians. Many settlements were built by members of the fundamentalist Gush Emunim movement which, with the support of the Likud government, was able to utilize economic incentives as well as ideological motives.

III. Sharon's "civil administration" plan of 1981

Upon becoming defence minister in 1981, Sharon initiated the most brutal period of repression in the West Bank and Gaza and set about crushing all opposition to the Israeli occupation. He implemented much harsher measures to combat Palestinian opposition to the Likud's settlement policies. The Palestinian residents were warned against resisting Jewish settlement and the "civil administration" plan launched by Sharon, which was aimed at imposing Begin's version of "autonomy for the Arabs of the land of Israel". By the end of the 1980s the first Palestinian *intifadah*

showed that reducing Palestinian resistance and encouraging the "moderates" (the "Village League" plan) to cooperate with the Likud autonomy plan of 1981 had failed completely.

IV. The Palestinians

Sharon remains deeply opposed to Palestinian nationalism and rules out Palestinian self-determination and statehood in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and he still opposes the establishment of an independent Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza. Until recently, he used to describe all Palestinians as "terrorists". In the 1980s Sharon advocated that "Jordan is Palestine". One of the key factors behind Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was to drive the Palestinians out of Lebanon and into Jordan.

In the 1980s Sharon's plans envision turning Jordan into a Palestinian state and holding onto the Occupied territories. Sharon, as defence minister in the second Begin government, first promoted the idea that the Palestinians already had a homeland - the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. But the idea of Transjordan as a "Palestinian homeland" has been used extensively by Sharon and other Likud leaders largely for polemical purposes and as a propaganda exercise aimed at delegitimizing the Palestinians. Some prominent members of the Likud still have an abiding ideological aversion to surrendering formally Jewish sovereignty claims over large portions of the East Bank [Jordan].

Throughout the 1980s Sharon was one of the most senior politicians in Israel who openly promoted the public debate on the "transfer solution". In 1982 Sharon implied, shortly before and perhaps while contemplating his planned invasion of Lebanon, that the Palestinians might have to be expelled, warning that they should "not forget the lesson of 1948". The hint was clear: Sharon's threat of a new mass expulsion if the Palestinians did not mind their manners also seemed to be directed towards the Palestinians as a whole, that is, those who are citizens of Israel as well as the inhabitants of the occupied territories.

When Sharon made his election victory speech on 6 February 2001, his supporters whistled in contempt and loathing each time their leader

mentioned the word Palestinians. Sharon is an old man with no political solutions. He can still make life more difficult for the Palestinians, but it is difficult to see how very much more miserable that could be and whether he still dreams of military solutions.

Throughout the 1990s Sharon continued to question the validity of the Palestinian National Authority as a legitimate representative of the Palestinians. After his election victory he declared that Israel will not resume peace talks with the Palestinians until the Palestinian National Authority brings an end to the al-Aqsa Intifada.

V. Jerusalem

Throughout 2000 Sharon kept attacking Ehud Barak's efforts to reach a some sort of deal with the Palestinian National Authority over control of East Jerusalem and the Old City's holy sites. After the failed Camp David talks in July 2000, Sharon sought to stir a public groundswell against Barak, depicting him as a usurper, ready to trade Jerusalem for a peace agreement. "Barak does not have the right to give up Jerusalem, which the people received as a legacy," Sharon said at a Knesset session.

Sharon's arrogant and provocative visit to Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites in late September 2000, which was immediately followed by a brutal crackdown by the Israeli army, ignited months of Palestinian *intifadah* (the al-Aqsa Intifada). Sharon declared that his visit was a demonstration of Israeli sovereignty over the site. In the last five months nearly 400 Palestinians (including 14 Palestinian citizens of Israel) have been killed, 13,000 injured, 1,500 crippled for life and 2,000 houses demolished.

VI. The Oslo peace process

Sharon embraced with fervour the cause of undermining the Oslo peace process. He has consistently promoted the view that only "peace can be traded for peace" (not for land). He actively opposed the Oslo peace process as a member of the opposition and as a government minister in the cabinet of Binyamin Netanyahu. On the face of it, the election of Sharon in February as prime minister is a perplexing choice, since many Israelis believe that Sharon is capable of delivering neither peace nor security. The

only obvious conclusion from these elections is that the Israeli public is not yet ready for peace.

VII. The Palestinians within the "Green Line"

Sharon is not usually known for his euphemism as to how the Palestinians within the Green Line (Israeli citizens) should be dealt with; he had no hesitation in openly describing them as "foreigners" and "aliens". He also claimed that "national [that is, state] land is actually robbed by foreigners... Although there is talk of the Judaization of Galilee, the region is regressing into a Gentile district... I initiated strong action to prevent aliens [Arab citizens] from taking state land." This was accompanied by harsh and threatening declarations by Sharon; the Arab citizens had no right to state lands which should be preserved exclusively for Jews. Besides, if Israel's Arabs did not mind their manners, they would be expelled.

Often obsessive in his attitude towards the Palestinians within the Green Line, Sharon regards them as a potential "fifth column". In 1964 a little known plan of Sharon's resurfaced, when Colonel Ariel Sharon, then chief of staff of the Northern Command, reportedly asked his staff to research the number of buses and trucks that would be required in case of war to "transport" some 300,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel out of the country. Sharon meant it to be a contingency plan that would be prepared and kept ready on the shelf to implement in case of war. In other words, Sharon intended to exploit a situation of war with an Arab country in order to drive Palestinian citizens out of the country in the name of security. Apparently, most of Sharon's subordinates refused to cooperate with him unless he showed them written orders from the army General Staff in Tel Aviv. They feared that, if Sharon's plan ever were to be exposed, it would greatly embarrass Israel.

In the 1980s Sharon showed great interest in the so-called "Israeli Arab demographic threat" as a major topic of debate in the Hebrew media and political speeches. He made several thinly-veiled threats to expel the Palestinian citizens of Israel if they did not mind their manners; something to the effect of "if you don't behave you'll be out". In December 1980, then presiding over the on-going "Judaization of Galilee" policy, Sharon had this to say at a conference in Kiryat Gat:

We have no inclination of dispossessing Arab citizens in the Galilee. But I would advise the Arab citizens in the region not to radicalize their attitudes in order not to bring about another tragedy like the one that befell the Palestinian people in 1948. Even if we do not want it, it may recur.

After the mass immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union in 1990-91, many of these Russian newcomers have been directed to the Galilee as part of a renewed effort reduce the so-called "Israeli Arab demographic threat" in the Galilee, the Little Triangle and the Negev. In late 1990 Sharon, then minister of housing, announced a plan to settle hundreds of thousands of Russian immigrants in a string of new settlements to be established on both sides the Green Line, which separates Israel from the West Bank.

Earlier in the late 1970s Sharon played a notorious role in evicting the Negev's bedouin from their lands and concentrating them into townships. In 1979 a decree was issued by Agriculture Minister Sharon declaring the entire area of the Negev south of the 50-degree line of latitude (a line beginning south of the Dead Sea) as a protected nature reserve in which the bedouins were forbidden to graze their black goats. Consequently, an area constituting almost half of the country was made out of bounds to bedouin herders who would not be able to live off the desert south of the 50-degree line.

In an effort to hasten the evacuation of the Negev bedouin from their lands and their forced sedentarization, a special armed unit known as the Green Patrol was set up in 1976 to "locate and rapidly evacuate" people who were deemed to be trespassing on state lands, that is to say, outside the areas permitted for the Negev bedouins. The Green Patrol was set up as an arm of the Ministry of Agriculture's Nature Reserve Authority and of the Israel Land Administration. Its activities against the Negev bedouin were stepped up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, partly as a reflection of the hard-line and militarist attitudes of Agriculture Minister Sharon and of Reserve General Avraham Yoffe, head of the Nature Reserve Authority, who was also an ideological comrade-in-arms of Sharon. The Hebrew press was full of eyewitness accounts of the activities of the Green Petrol, including confiscating animals, beating up women and children and destroying homes. Metal houses or tents were bulldozed or burnt, often with the occupants' belongings inside; herds were either confiscated or

scattered; shots were fired and smoke bombs were used to get people out of their houses; dams were demolished; fruit and olive trees were uprooted and crops were ploughed over.

VIII. Jordan and the Arab states

Sharon's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was typical of his contemptuous arrogance towards Israel's Arab neighbours. He perceives many Arab states to be a threat to Israel's security. In an interview in the early 1990s, Sharon claimed that since the collapse of Soviet communism, the main threat to world security was a second evil empire of extremist Arab states and Iran. Many of Sharon's closest associates keep threatening to bomb Tehran and Beirut. However, whether Sharon has learnt in the years since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that a general conflict with the Arab states would solve nothing remains an open question.

In the past Sharon championed a Palestinian state - one across the Jordan river replacing the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In recent years, however, he developed close and growing connections with the Hashemite regime and has even become a regular visitor to Amman. Some observers believe that Sharon has now thrown his lot with the Hashemites, promising two things. First, there will be no real Palestinian state. At most there will be a group of "autonomous" Palestinian Bantustans surrounded by, and nearly totally controlled and dependent on, Israel, with Jordan the junior partner of Israel.

Second that the Israelis, as well as the Americans, will protect the Hashemite crown with arms, intelligence and, if need be, military intervention. No longer will Sharon champion the "Jordan is Palestine" mantra. What Sharon envisages for the Palestinians is a kind of Zionist-Hashemite sandwich, Sharon observers argue.

IX. The United States

The US State Department singled out Sharon for rare criticism after his provocative visit to the Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites in September 2000. However, there is no indication that the new Republican administration's policy towards Israel will be radically different from the

policies pursued by all American administrations since the late 1950s. Sharon himself is suspicious of US intentions regarding the restoration of the Oslo peace process. He believes that the United States plans to push Israel back to the 1967 borders and beyond. He is also contemptuous of what he calls US intervention in Israeli affairs. The Americans should not treat the Israelis as "natives" and we should not behave as beggars, Sharon stated. Publicly, Sharon has also expressed concerns about Israel's economic reliance on the US and has stated his belief that Israel should become more independent of US aid. Sharon's reluctance to proceed with the US-sponsored Oslo peace process would almost certainly anger the Bush administration.

Populist support base and political allies

In Israel Sharon is popular among the Israeli right and is seen, like Rabin, as a military hero. Throughout his political career, he has nurtured a large right-wing populist support base.

Sharon has strong populist support within the Likud. Sharon also has strong connections with the far right, including with Raphael Eitan, leader of Tzomet, a right-wing party aligned with Likud. Eitan was also the IDF's chief of staff during the invasion of Lebanon.

Leaders of Gush Emunim, the most prominent West Bank settler movement, are also major allies of Sharon. Sharon, in his capacity as agriculture minister and minister of housing and construction, was instrumental in injecting massive amounts of funds into settlement construction, with which Gush Emunim was closely associated.

Members of the US Jewish lobby have also supported Sharon. American supporters assisted Sharon in buying the largest privately-owned ranch in Israel in 1973.

Sharon also has strong following among Sephardic Jews in Israel.

Political opponents and critics

Opponents include the Zionist left, a large section of the Labour party, Meretz, the Arab parties in Israel, a large section of the Israeli press and perhaps most Israeli intellectuals.

Sharon has injured many who have been past allies, including former Likud prime ministers Binyamin Netanyahu and Yitzhak Shamir. Sharon repeatedly challenged Shamir and Netanyahu in the past for the prime ministership.

Previous US administrations have criticized Sharon. Sharon's resignation following the Kahan Commission's report was welcomed by some US officials. But the Sharon government will come under fire from European countries and the European Union.

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