

## Ariel Sharon dies at 85 after decades as polarising presence

To his critics he will forever be the “Butcher of Beirut”, the master of Israel’s disastrous [invasion of Lebanon](http://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2013/jan/04/lebanon-israel-palestinians-thatcher-reagan) in 1982 and the man responsible for the horrendous massacre of hundreds of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. His supporters will celebrate him as one of the most daring and ingenious military commanders in Israel’s history and the prime minister who engineered the [withdrawal from the Gaza Strip](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4235768.stm) in 2005, bringing an end to 38 years of military occupation. Ariel “Arik” Sharon, Israel’s 11th prime minister, was certainly a controversial figure.

Described by Ronald Reagan as “a bellicose man who seemed to be chomping at the bit to start a war” and by George W Bush as “a man of peace”, few contemporary figures could match Sharon’s talent for invoking such contradictory sentiments by two American presidents.

Sharon had been comatose for eight years and seven days, after suffering a massive [stroke](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jan/05/israel1) on 4 January, 2006. At the time, he was the most popular politician in Israel and was widely expected to win a third successive term as prime minister – but his legacy makes him arguably the most divisive public figure in the country’s history.

One of the last members of Israel’s generation of founding fathers (Shimon Peres, the president, is another), Sharon was personally involved in – and often responsible for – some of the most important military and political events that have shaped modern Israel. Born Ariel Scheinerman in Mandatory Palestine in 1928, he joined the Haganah, the Jewish underground military force, at the young age of 14. He went on to serve in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) for 25 years, fighting in four wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973) and reaching the rank of major general.

### Military career

He first gained a national reputation as an audacious military commander in the early 1950s, when he formed and commanded Unit 101, a special forces unit which carried dozens of retaliatory raids against Arab civilian and military targets, of which the [Qibya massacre](http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Qibya_massacre.html) of October 1953 is the most infamous. After the 1973 [October War](http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2013/10/war-october-2013102172128280627.html), in which he led the IDF’s historic crossing of Suez Canal, Sharon retired as a war hero and entered politics. He helped form the right-wing Likud Party, and was known as the father of the Jewish settlement movement. For this he earned the moniker “the bulldozer”, reflecting both his sizeable frame and his unyielding determination to expand settlement activity in the Occupied Territories.

Sharon’s career reached its most iniquitous peak as defence minister in Menachem Begin’s 1981-83 Likud government. Firmly convinced that “the Arabs only understand the language of force”, Sharon was determined to push out of Southern Lebanon the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which for years had been shelling Israel’s northern towns and carried out cross-border raids against civilians from its bases in Southern Lebanon. As the architect of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, Sharon deceived the government about the operation’s objectives and turned a blind eye to the massacre in [Sabra and Shatila](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/1390979.stm) carried out by Israel’s allies, the Christian Phalanges. In 1983 an Israeli commission of inquiry found that he bore personal responsibility for failing to prevent the atrocity, and he was removed from his post. [Uri Dan](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/25/world/middleeast/25dan.html?_r=0), his long-time aide and friend memorably noted then that: “Those who didn’t want to see him as army chief shall have him as defence minister, and those who didn’t want him as defence minister shall have him as prime minister.”

This prescient observation became reality 18 years later, when Sharon beat the incumbent Ehud Barak in the 2001 prime ministerial [elections](http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections01/eindex.html). Sharon’s landslide victory (winning 62% of the votes) came months after his incendiary [visit to Temple Mount](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/28/newsid_3687000/3687762.stm) in Jerusalem, in the midst of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Camp David. Sharon’s visit provided the spark which ignited the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising), which claimed the lives of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians in the ensuing four years.

Sharon’s determination to quash the surging Palestinian violence reminded many observers of the conflict of his unsavoury stint as defence minister. He oversaw the construction of the controversial [security barrier](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3111159.stm) in the West Bank to defend Israeli citizens from Palestinian suicide bombers, and ordered numerous military incursions into Palestinian towns and the targeted assassinations of the spiritual, political and military leaders of various Palestinian armed groups. In one of the most poignant depictions of him during this period, a [cartoon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dave_Brown's_Goya_Ariel_Sharon.jpg) in the Independent portrayed a monstrous Sharon biting off the head of a Palestinian child as the Israeli army flattens a Palestinian town.

In the midst of the intifada Sharon came to realise that in the absence of an agreed settlement with the Palestinian Authority, Israel may have to take unilateral steps to guarantee its national interests and the security of its citizens. In a candid interview with [CNN](http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/05/26/mideast/) in May 2003, Sharon laid out his political vision which seemed to transform him overnight from one of Israel’s leading hawks to a conscientious dove: “You cannot like the word, but what is happening is an occupation - to hold 3.5 million Palestinians under occupation. I believe that is a terrible thing for Israel and for the Palestinians ... It can’t continue endlessly. Do you want to stay forever in Jenin, in Nablus, in Ramallah, in Bethlehem? I don’t think that’s right.”

### Volte-face

Sharon poured substance into his vision in August 2005, when he orchestrated Israel’s historic disengagement from the Gaza Strip, which had been under military occupation since the 1967 Six Day War. Sharon’s uprooting of 8,500 Israeli settlers – for decades his most ardent support base - opened a historic chasm in the country’s political landscape. Though the majority of the Israeli public supported the disengagement plan, Sharon came under heavy criticism from many Likud members. In November 2005 he [left the party](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4456422.stm) which he had helped to form more than four decades earlier. He set up a new centrist party, Kadima (forward), which was now home to former Likud as well as Labour politicians, all of them united behind Sharon’s vision to pursue another unilateral withdrawal – this time from the West Bank.

Less than a month later, on 18 December, 2005, Sharon suffered a minor stroke. He was ordered to rest and return to hospital for cardiac catheterization on 5 January, 2006. But he returned to work immediately, and on 4 January suffered a hemorrhagic stroke from which he did not recover. He remained comatose for 8 years, and on 1 January, 2014 his condition deteriorated further after suffering kidney failure.

Much like Ariel Sharon in recent years, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been comatose for some time, though these days the indefatigable US Secretary of State John Kerry is attempting to resuscitate it once again. Should Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister and Sharon’s long-time nemesis, replicate Sharon’s volte-face on Israeli-Palestinian relations, it will surely be the bulldozer’s greatest legacy.

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