

Israel - On the Legacy of Ariel Sharon: Not Speaking Ill of the Dead “Imposes a Vow of Silence”

Wednesday 15 January 2014, by [CHOMSKY Noam](#), [GOODMAN Amy](#), [KHALIDI Rashid](#), [SHLAIM Avi](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2014).

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon died Saturday at the age of 85 after eight years in a coma. Sharon was one of the most dominant political figures in Israel's history, involved in each of Israel's major wars dating back to its founding in 1948. Among Palestinians, Sharon was one of the most reviled political figures in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He is seen as father of the settlement movement and an architect of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that killed a reported 20,000 Palestinian and Lebanese. We discuss Sharon's legacy with three guests: Noam Chomsky, world-renowned political dissident, linguist, author and Institute Professor Emeritus at Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University; and Avi Shlaim, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at Oxford University, widely regarded as one of the world's leading scholars on the Israeli-Arab conflict. “There is a convention that you're not supposed to speak ill of the recently dead, which unfortunately imposes a kind of vow of silence, because there is nothing good to say,” Chomsky says. “He was a brutal killer; he had one fixed idea in mind which drove him all his life: a greater Israel, as powerful as possible, as few Palestinians as possible. ... He doubtless showed courage and commitment to pursuing this ideal, which is an ugly and horrific one.”

TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: We begin in Israel, where a state funeral was held today in front of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, for former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He died Saturday after eight years in a coma. He was 85 years old. He'll be buried in a state funeral today at his home in southern Israel.

The U.S. was among eight countries—18 countries to send delegations to attend Sharon's funeral, along with Middle East international envoy Tony Blair and the Russian and German foreign ministers. At a state memorial in Jerusalem, Vice President Joe Biden remembered Sharon as a controversial, but bold military leader and statesman.

VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: *When he told 10,000 Israelis to leave their homes in Gaza in order, from his perspective, to strengthen Israel, I can't think of a much more controversial—as a student of the Jewish state, I can't think of a much more difficult and controversial decision been made. But he believed it, and he did it. The security of his people was always Arik's unwavering mission, a non-breakable commitment to the future of Jews, whether 30 years or 300 years from now.*

AMY GOODMAN: That was Vice President Joe Biden speaking during Ariel Sharon's memorial. Thousands of Israelis came to pay their respects as his coffin lay in state outside the parliament building in Jerusalem. Ministers held a minute's silence at Sunday's Cabinet meeting to remember their former leader. This is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: *[translated] In all of his latest roles as minister of defense, as minister of housing, minister of infrastructures, minister of foreign affairs, Arik has contributed to the state of Israel and, as much as he could, to the security of Israel, and that's what he did as Israel's prime minister. I believe he represents a generation of Jewish leaders who rose from our people with the resumption of our independence. He was tied to the land. He knew the need to protect the land, and he understood that, above all that, our independence is our ability to protect ourselves by ourselves. I believe he will be remembered as one of the prominent leaders and one of the bravest commanders in the heart of Israel forever.*

AMY GOODMAN: Ariel Sharon has been one of the most dominant political figures in Israel's history, involved in each of Israel's major wars dating back to its founding in 1948. As prime minister, he oversaw Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The Gaza withdrawal caused a serious rift in Sharon's Likud Party, which led to his departure. He formed a new party, Kadima, which maintained the Gaza disengagement while expanding Israeli control over the major settlement blocks in the occupied West Bank.

Among Palestinians, Sharon was one of the most reviled political figures in the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict. He's seen as father of the settlement movement, an architect of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which killed a reported 20,000 Palestinians and Lebanese. An Israeli commission of inquiry found Sharon had indirect responsibility for the massacre of over a thousand Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps in Lebanon in 1982.

To talk about Ariel Sharon's life and legacy, we're joined now by three guests. In New York, we're joined by Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University, author of a number of books, including *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* and, just reissued, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking During the 1982 War*.

Joining us from his home in Massachusetts by phone, Noam Chomsky, world-renowned political dissident, linguist and author, Institute Professor Emeritus at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he's taught for more than 50 years. His 1983 book, *The Fateful Triangle*, is known as one of the definitive works on the Israel-Palestine conflict and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

And we are also joined from Oxford by Avi Shlaim, an Emeritus Professor of International Studies at Oxford University, the author of *Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations*. He served in the Israeli army in the mid-'60s and is widely regarded as one of the world's leading scholars on the Israeli-Arab conflict.

We welcome you all to Democracy Now! Let's go first to the Israeli historian, Avi Shlaim. Your response to the death of Ariel Sharon, what you feel he should be remembered for?

AVI SHLAIM: Ariel Sharon is one of the most iconic and controversial figures in Israel's history. He had deep—he was a deeply flawed character, renowned for his brutality, mendacity and corruption. Despite these character flaws, he is a major figure in shaping Israel's modern history.

He was one of the five most influential figures who left a deep mark on modern Israel. The first was David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state, who in 1949 concluded the armistice agreements with the neighboring Arab states, the only internationally recognized borders that Israel has ever had. Second was Levi Eshkol, who, in the aftermath of the June 1967 War, presided over the transformation of Israel from a plucky little democracy into a brutal colonial power. The third was the Likud leader, Menachem Begin, who signed the first peace treaty with an Arab country. He signed the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979. The fourth was Yitzhak Rabin, the only Israeli prime minister who went forward on the political front towards the Palestinians, and he did this by signing

the Oslo Accord in 1993 and clinching the historic compromise between the two nations with the iconic handshake with Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn.

And finally, there is Ariel Sharon, who always rejected the Oslo peace process, who as prime minister tried to sweep away the remnants of Oslo and forge a new strategy of unilateralism, of giving up on the Palestinians and redrawing unilaterally the borders of greater Israel. So, his legacy can be summed up in one word—unilateralism—acting in defiance of U.N. resolutions, international law and international public opinion. The real question is: How was Ariel Sharon, and how is Israel today under his successors, able to defy the entire international community? And the answer to that is that Israel could not have done it on its own, but it has a little friend, and the friend is the United States of America. But that is a different story.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to break and then get response from Professor Rashid Khalidi and Professor Noam Chomsky, as well as continue our discussion with Israeli historian Avi Shlaim. This is Democracy Now! We're talking about the death of Ariel Sharon. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking about the death of the former prime minister, Ariel Sharon, who died Saturday after eight years in a coma. He was 85 years old. We are joined by Professor Noam Chomsky in Massachusetts, by Avi Shlaim, the Israeli historian at Oxford University in Britain, and we're joined here in New York by Rashid Khalidi. Among his books are *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*. He's the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University. You're also Palestinian. Your response to the death of Ariel Sharon?

RASHID KHALIDI: Well, for me, the most important emotion is a sense of, finally, the man who carried out a war in which 20,000 people were killed, the Lebanon War of 1982, who besieged Beirut, who destroyed building after building, killing scores of civilians in a search to destroy the PLO leadership, has finally left the world. I was in Beirut that summer of 1982. And I—to me, it's horrific to watch the hagiographies that are being produced by people like Vice President Biden, by The New York Times, by much of the media, about a man who really should have ended his days at The Hague before the International Criminal Court. He was a man who, from the very beginning of his career, started out killing people. As the commander of Unit 101, he was the man who ordered the Qibya massacre.

AMY GOODMAN: Explain. What is Unit 101?

RASHID KHALIDI: Unit 101 was a military unit of the Israeli army formed at the orders of the Israeli leadership of the time to carry out savage reprisal raids. But we're talking about dozens of victims. In retaliation for, in this case, two or three people being killed, 69 people had their homes blown up over their heads.

AMY GOODMAN: When was this?

RASHID KHALIDI: This was 1953 in a small village in the—what is today the West Bank. This was the first condemnation of Israel by a Security Council resolution. This was something that the United States at the time was willing to say was a horrible, horrible crime. And this is a man who, since then, really, has only acted on the basis of a belief that force is the only thing the Arabs understand. The idea that he is now considered by some to be a peacemaker is grotesque, frankly.

AMY GOODMAN: Noam Chomsky, you wrote *The Fateful Triangle* in response to what happened in Lebanon. It changed the discourse for many in this country. First, explain your reaction to the death

of Ariel Sharon and what we should understand about him.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, you know, there is a convention that you're not supposed to speak ill of the recently dead, which unfortunately imposes a kind of vow of silence because there's nothing else to say—there's nothing good to say. What both Rashid and Avi Shlaim have said is exactly accurate. He was a brutal killer. He had one fixed idea in mind, which drove him all his life: a greater Israel, as powerful as possible, as few Palestinians as possible—they should somehow disappear—and an Israel which could be powerful enough to dominate the region. The Lebanon War then, which was his worst crime, also had a goal of imposing a client state in Lebanon, a Maronite client state. And these were the driving forces of his life.

The idea that the Gaza evacuation was a controversial step for peace is almost farcical. By 2005, Gaza had been devastated, and he played a large role in that. The Israeli hawks could understand easily that it made no sense to keep a few thousand Israeli settlers in Gaza using a very large percentage of its land and scarce water with a huge IDF, Israeli army, contingent to protect them. What made more sense was to take them out and place them in the West Bank or the Golan Heights—illegal. It could have been done very simply. They could have—the Israeli army could have announced that on August 1st they're leaving Gaza, in which case the settlers would have piled into the trucks that were provided to them, which would take them from their subsidized homes in Gaza to illegal subsidized homes in other territories that Israel intended to keep, and that would have been the end of it. But instead, a—what Israeli sociologists call, Baruch Kimmerling called an “absurd theater” was constructed to try to demonstrate to the world that there cannot be any further evacuations.

The farce was a successful public relations effort. Joseph Biden's comments illustrate that. It was particularly farcical when you recognize that it was a virtual replay of what happened in 1982 when Israel was compelled to withdraw from the Egyptian Sinai and carried out an operation that the Israeli press ridiculed as Operation National Trauma 1982: We have to show the world how much we're suffering by carrying out an action that will benefit our power and our security. And that was the peacemaking effort.

But his career is one of unrelenting brutality, dedication to the fixed idea of his life. He doubtless showed courage and commitment to pursuing this ideal, which is an ugly and horrific one.

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* http://www.democracynow.org/2014/1/13/noam_chomsky_on_the_legacy_of

* Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University and author of several books, including his latest, *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*, and the just reissued, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking During the 1982 War*.

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