

Recalling Ariel Sharon and the Sabra and Chatila massacres

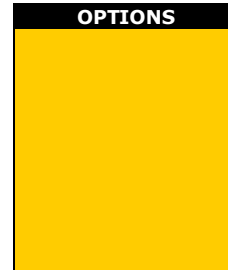
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Last weekend, the BBC World satellite station, as well as the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation, (both London-based stations viewable in Lebanon), replayed a Panorama program shown the week before on Britain's BBC1.

The subject of the program was Ariel Sharon's involvement in, and responsibility for, the Sabra and Chatila massacres, a topic that has generated commendable attention of late.

The Panorama program came as a Belgian magistrate received a complaint in the name of **Premier Sharon: hiding behind excuses?** survivors of the massacre prepared by three lawyers, a Lebanese, Chibli Mallat, and two Belgians, Michael Verhaeghe and Luc Walley. The British anthropologist, Rosemary Sayegh, and a Palestinian refugee, Sana Hussein, who gathered testimonies from dozens of victims, assisted the legal team.

For a moment, the Panorama program seemed to influence the British prime minister, Tony Blair. Prior to Sharon's passage through London on his way to the United States for a meeting with George W. Bush, there were reports that Blair would not meet the Israeli prime minister. The inference was that Blair preferred to stay away from the Sabra and Chatila entanglement. He later backtracked, no doubt at Israel's insistence.



The US has had no qualms dealing with Sharon. One day, a history will be written of how the more robust democracies transacted with those perpetrating crimes against humanity. The conclusion will be that they were among the most willing to look the other way when their interests were at play.

The US used Slobodan Milosevic to arrive at the Dayton accords in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the same way as they "cultivated" former Nazis after the Second World War.

Much the same can be said of Washington's dealings with Sharon. The notion that the Israeli prime minister might, in fact, be a war criminal is so alien to the American psyche, that the US media have largely played down the Sabra and Chatila allegations.

And yet the details of Sharon's involvement in the massacres have long been known, thanks largely to Israeli sources, particularly the report of the Kahane commission appointed to investigate the killings in 1982. The commission found that Sharon was indirectly responsible for what had taken place in the camps.

However, all this meant was that he had not directly executed the victims — a choice role reserved for the Lebanese Forces. In a far more powerful passage, the commission noted that “the Minister of Defense bears personal responsibility” for the massacres.

Since 1982, Sharon has hidden behind the lamest of excuses in arguing his innocence: He has said that he could not have predicted what would take place in the camps.

To this day, Israeli spokesmen pursue this frayed argument, when the Kahane commission proved beyond a doubt that numerous Israeli commanders, including the chief-of-staff, Raphael Eitan, feared the Lebanese Forces would perpetrate a massacre. The argument that Sharon was somehow gulled, is, to say the least, inane.

But there is more. According to the two Israeli authors, Ze’ev Schiff and Ehud Ya’ari, Sharon did two things before the massacre, raising serious doubts as to his responsibility in inciting the Lebanese Forces.

First, prior to the Israeli army’s entering West Beirut, he rallied the Lebanese Forces, who were demoralized by Bashir Gemayel’s death the day before, and virtually forced them to participate in the military operation.

And second, he was overheard telling Lebanese Forces commanders that he wanted the PLO’s infrastructure in Beirut removed: “I don’t want a single one of them left,” he said.

When his interlocutor, Elie Hobeika, asked how civilians and combatants could be distinguished, Sharon failed to respond. Had he wanted to avert the killing of innocents, Sharon would have clarified an order that could so easily have been misinterpreted.

As a footnote to the ongoing legal case against Sharon, it is worth referring to the article by one Saleh al-Naamani, a political commentator writing for the Hamas weekly, *Al-Risala*.

Naamani recently wrote that, though Sharon bore responsibility for the massacres, those who had actually perpetrated the killings, the Lebanese Forces, were never punished. He singled out Hobeika and Fadi Frem for particular blame.

Naamani has a point. The pursuit of Sharon should not be used as an excuse to cover up Lebanese responsibility for the massacres.

Sabra and Chatila was as much a Lebanese crime — in some cases perpetrated against other Lebanese — as an Israeli one. If justice is to be served, then it might as well be comprehensive.

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