



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on January 13, 2014

Israel Conducts Funeral for Former Prime Minister Sharon

Former Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon (shown), who died on January 11 after spending eight years in a coma following a major stroke in 2006, was laid to rest on January 13.



Israel's *Haaretz* daily newspaper reported that Sharon's funeral ceremonies began Monday morning with an official ceremony at the Knesset, where the late prime minister's body lay in state on Sunday. Among those delivering speeches at the ceremony were Israel's President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as U.S. Vice President Joe Biden.

Other world dignitaries attending the memorial ceremonies were Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Czech Prime Minister Jiri Rusnok.

Following the ceremony at the Knesset, the funeral procession traveled from Jerusalem to Sycamore Ranch, Sharon's farm in the Negev region of southern Israel, where he was buried. Peres, Netanyahu, Biden and many of the other visiting foreign dignitaries laid wreaths on Sharon's grave.

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[JTA \(the Jewish Telegraphic Agency\)](#) noted that Sharon left a mixed legacy, having achieved fame as a commander of the Israeli Army, where he was considered by his peers to be one of the country's greatest military strategists. After retiring from the military, Sharon entered politics, joining the center-Right Likud Party and serving in several ministerial posts in Likud-led governments from 1977-92 and 1996-99. Sharon became the leader of the Likud in 2000, and served as Israel's prime minister from 2001 to 2006. Sharon left the Likud party in 2005 to form the new Kadima party. The major area of disagreement between Sharon and his supporters and Likud was resistance to the unilateral disengagement plan he had proposed. The plan aimed to resettle all Israelis from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the northern West Bank.

The JTA writer noted:

For Israelis, Sharon has been both hero and bete noir. For much of his career he was an outspoken founder of the settlement movement, declaring in 2002 that the fate of the Gaza settlement of Netzarim was tied to the fate of Tel Aviv. A year later, he betrayed his pro-settlement base by withdrawing from Gaza entirely. And while most Israelis admired Sharon as a dogged hero of Israel's first four wars, his orchestration of the controversial 1982 Lebanon War ... and his role in the Sabra and Shatila massacre would forever tarnish his reputation.

JTA noted that President Peres (who left the Labor Party in 2005 to support Sharon and his new Kadima party) portrayed Sharon as an example of a military hero who later came to champion peace. Peres



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described Sharon as a “military legend in his lifetime [who] then turned his gaze to the day Israel would dwell in safety, when our children would return to our borders and peace would grace the Promised Land.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a Likud Party chairman who quit Sharon’s government in protest of the Gaza disengagement, but who is now engaged in peace negotiations with the Palestinians, recalled his past disagreements with Sharon but nevertheless praised him.

“I did not always agree with Arik [Sharon’s nickname] and he did not always agree with me,” Netanyahu said Monday. “But when we served in each other’s governments we worked in cooperation for the benefit of Israel’s security and economy. Arik was a practical and pragmatic man.”

[Aljazeera America](#) also noted the shift in Sharon’s position on Israeli settlement building in Palestinian lands, first favoring such settlements but “then, as prime minister, [Sharon made] the shock decision to withdraw from Gaza in 2005.”

The [Jerusalem Post](#) reported that Prime Minister Netanyahu met Vice President Joe Biden in his Jerusalem residence Monday evening following the Sharon funeral, but that neither party had made a public statement. Before meeting Netanyahu, Biden met President Peres and said Israel’s security rested in “genuine accommodation” with a Palestinian state. Biden described the Arab Spring as an “incredibly historical phenomenon,” and said “the only place where there is a possibility for an island of stability is quite frankly between the Palestinian people and the Israeli people, in two secure states respecting one another’s sovereignty and security.”

Biden’s remarks at the funeral were posted on the [White House website](#). The Vice President said, in part:

Like all historic leaders, Prime Minister Sharon was a complex man about whom, as you’ve already heard from his colleagues, who engendered strong opinions from everyone. But like all historic leaders, all real leaders, he had a North Star that guided him — a North Star from which he never, in my observation, never deviated. His North Star was the survival of the State of Israel and the Jewish people, wherever they resided.

Biden recalled Sharon’s controversial decision to withdraw Israeli settlers fro Gaza:

The political courage it took, whether you agreed with him or not, 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 much more controversial; as a student of the Jewish state, I can’t think of a much more difficult and controversial decision that’s been made. But he believed it and he did it.

The vice president also offered this explanation for Sharon’s apparent change in sentiment upon becoming a political leader:

As prime minister, he surprised many. I’ve been told that, in reflecting on the difference between how he viewed things as a general and as prime minister, he would paraphrase an Israeli song lyric that said, things you see from here, look different from over there.

[Haaretz](#) published an opinion piece on January 13 written by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie of Westfield, New Jersey. In his commentary, in which Yoffie explains why Sharon was his hero, the rabbi says that, at present, “Israel’s standing with the U.S. and Western Europe has continued to deteriorate, while the right in Israel and America curses Obama, holding him responsible.”

In contrast, notes Yoffie, “Under Sharon, such a scenario is impossible to imagine. He would never have



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permitted it. There were ups and downs with America during his years, to be sure, but never a true crisis. He cultivated close personal ties with George W. Bush, who liked and respected him.”

Yoffie also wrote: “Ariel Sharon was absolutely right to get out of Gaza. If Israel had controlled Gaza for the last 8 years, with fewer than 10,000 settlers remaining among the 1.7 million residents of the area, Israel’s situation there, and in the world, would be far worse than it currently is.”

As Israel and the world bids farewell to Ariel Sharon, his career as a military leader is almost universally praised; his tenure as a political leader, less so. However, Sharon did exhibit one uncommon trait indicating that he possessed a rare commodity in his part of the world — he was a man willing to compromise in the interest of peace.



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