

word *Shalom*, meaning “peace,” and also as it’s used as a greeting.

Sharon refused to meet with the group. They have met with Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (Labor Party) and Labor Party leader Yossi Beilin, and were expected to meet Israeli President Moshe Katsav and even former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, both of Sharon’s Likud Party.

The initiative received a mixed response from the peace camp, and is opposed by the Palestinians who fear that a new defense line would become a de facto border, at the expense of Palestinian territory. Nonetheless, everyone agrees that the initiative is a clear vote of no-confidence against Ariel Sharon, by his own peers in the military and security establishment.

### The Economy Continues To Collapse

The other important contributing factor to the sea-change developing within the Israeli population, is the dramatic collapse of the Israeli economy. At 258,000, the number of unemployed has now reached the highest level since the founding of the state—10.2% of the population, and a 19.7% increase over the past 12 months. This sharp increase is hitting hard at the university-educated part of the workforce. Israel’s Gross Domestic Product has collapsed—a whopping 7.2% annualized rate of collapse in the fourth quarter, the worst since 1953. This followed a 4% annualized rate for the third quarter. Thus Israel, alongside Japan, are the only two advanced economies to have officially registered negative growth for 2001. Per-capita GDP was even worse, falling 9.5% for the fourth quarter and 7% for all of 2001.

The Israeli currency, the shekel, continues to remain very volatile, having gone through an 8% devaluation in the last two months. Hovering around 4.7 to the dollar, it is feared that it could collapse beyond 5 to the dollar.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post* on Feb. 18, David Kimche, former director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and a member of the Council for Peace, warned: “The clock has begun ticking for Ariel Sharon,” and if he doesn’t change his policy, he will find himself out of power. “Like a giant spider caught in its own web, Sharon is entrapped in our own sick political system. Our economy is bleeding,” Kimche wrote, “yet billions of shekels that could have been used for productive purposes and for reducing the soaring unemployment are siphoned off to placate coalition partners. Within months, perhaps weeks, this country will be engulfed by some of the worst demonstrations we have yet seen, as more and more unemployed take to the streets. . . . Factories are shutting down? More people drop below the poverty line? Too bad, but settlements in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip take precedence over ailing development towns.”

Kimche wrote that the increasing attacks “have shown once more [that] military might on its own cannot overcome terror gangs.” Kimche concluded that either Sharon changes his policies and begins to negotiate, or both his government, and Israel along with it, are going to face a catastrophe.

## The Truth Sticks: Sharon Is a Liar

by Dean Andromidas

Over four decades ago, then-Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion called Ariel Sharon, now Israel’s prime minister, “an incorrigible liar.” On Feb. 17, the Israeli Supreme Court seconded Ben-Gurion’s judgment, in another case dealing with Sharon’s infamous role in the 1982 Lebanon War, where he earned the title “The Butcher of Lebanon.” Although the case is entirely separate from the case now in the Belgian courts accusing Sharon of direct responsibility for the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps, it nonetheless represents another failure of Sharon to gain some form of “legal” legitimacy for the lies he has continued to peddle about his role in that war.

The case involves a libel suit that Sharon had filed against journalist Uzi Benziman, who wrote in the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, in 1991, that Sharon had lied to then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin. This was in 1982, when Sharon told the Israeli cabinet that his proposed Lebanon invasion would penetrate no more than 40 kilometers, to secure Israel’s borders from cross-border attacks by Palestinian fighters. He told the Israeli public and the United States the same thing. When the Israeli Army did not stop until it had encircled Beirut, Sharon asserted that this was only a response to an unfolding situation, and not preplanned.

Nonetheless, it became widely accepted that Sharon did in fact lie to Begin and everyone else about his real intention, which was to kill Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat, and establish an Israeli puppet government in Beirut, led by the Christian Phalange. These are the same Phalangists Sharon is accused of ordering into the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps to solve the “Palestinian refugee problem,” through a bloody massacre which killed 1,700 Palestinians.

Benziman demonstrated in his article that Sharon was not to be trusted. “Menachem Begin knows very well that Sharon deceived him,” he wrote. But this lie about the Lebanon War was just one of several Benziman wrote about. After the Supreme Court’s decision, Benziman was quoted by *Ha’aretz* as saying, “I wrote this sentence 11 years ago, on a subject that was entirely different than the Lebanon War—it was about a different lie of Sharon’s, in which he said that Begin had told him that Jordan was the Palestinian state. Begin, who at the time was in seclusion in his home after he had resigned the premiership, suddenly issued an angry announcement,

saying, 'What do you mean that I said such a thing?' and then Sharon stuttered in embarrassment. I mentioned this in order to illustrate how Sharon dared to ascribe to Begin, things that Begin hadn't said, and in this context, I said that regarding the Lebanon War, Begin now, in hindsight, knew that Sharon had deceived him."

Among the evidence Benziman had brought before the court was a 1987 article by Benjamin Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, Menachem's son, in reaction to a lecture Sharon had given at the time at Tel Aviv University. The stunning lies which Sharon apparently presented as fact, prompted the younger Begin to write that Sharon would go to any length to become prime minister, and that he was untrustworthy. In effect, Benny Begin came to the same conclusion as Ben-Gurion: "Sharon was an incorrigible liar."

Benny Begin's article is said to have put a halt to Sharon's intention to launch a bid to capture the leadership of the Likud Party in 1987.

One of the contributing reasons for the lower court's decision to rule against Sharon, was the fact that he did not bring the libel case against *Ha'aretz* until after Menachem Begin had died, which was several years after the Benziman article! This not-so-subtle move to ensure that this obvious potential witness would not be around to testify, did not go unnoticed by the judges.

In rejecting Sharon's case, the court ordered Sharon to pay 15,000 shekels to Benziman to cover legal expenses.

## Meanwhile, in Belgium

On Feb. 14, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favor of Democratic Republic of the Congo Foreign Minister Yerodia Aboulaye Ndombasi, who had challenged the legality of a Belgian court's arrest warrant charging him with crimes against humanity. The ICJ ruled that as an acting foreign minister, Ndombasi possessed diplomatic immunity, and therefore ruled the arrest warrant illegal. This decision has led to speculation that the case against Sharon, now before a Belgian court, would also have to be dropped.

According to a statement by the attorneys representing the Palestinian plaintiffs, this may not be the case. First, the state of Israel does not recognize the jurisdiction of the ICJ. Moreover, the ruling itself is highly controversial, and in fact "undermines the progress of international tribunals."

Second, the ruling is chiefly in reference to the issuance of the arrest warrant which it declared illegal in light of its ruling on immunity. There was no ruling on the legality of the investigation. In the Sharon case, no arrest warrant has been issued, nor was one planned.

Third, the ruling refers to acting ministers, which leaves open the possibility of issuing an arrest warrant after Sharon leaves office.

Although the Belgian appeals court is expected to issue a ruling on March 6 on whether the case against Sharon can proceed, this will most likely be postponed pending a new

hearing, in light of the ICJ ruling. Even if the appeals court rejects the case against Sharon, based on diplomatic immunity, the other defendant, Gen. Amos Yaron, is not covered by such immunity.

## It Won't End in Belgium

Even if Sharon "wins" in Belgium, his troubles are not over. A member of the Israeli Knesset (parliament), Zahava Gal-On (Meretz Party), has gone to the Israeli Supreme Court to demand that all the testimony and minutes from the Kahan Commission, which investigated the massacres, be made public. He first made this demand in January 2001, but the government decided that the documents could not, for security reasons, be released until after the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) had reviewed them. The government said that that would take six months. Although the IDF started the review last August, Gal-On now says that its six months are up, and is threatening to go back to the high court.

Indicating how important the documents could be, Gal-On referenced a statement by Amos Gilad, former head of research for military intelligence, which appeared in a biography of former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Gilad, who had been a major during the Lebanon War, was quoted saying, "Already in 1980 I regarded the Phalange as a bunch of ruthless murderers who were destined to drag Israel into a swamp, and now, as they were on the verge of entering Sabra and Chatila, it was clear to me they were going to slaughter women and children: I shouted it loudly."

Gal-On wondered how it was possible that a young, junior officer could see what the defense minister at the time (Sharon) could not, and what that says about his competence to lead the country.

Last but not least, on Feb. 4, Omri Sharon, the son of Prime Minister Sharon, was questioned for several hours by the police fraud squad investigating his role in setting up shell companies to finance, illegally, one of his father's election campaigns. These companies were used to launder campaign donations from U.S. sources, which is illegal under Israeli election laws. Omri refused to cooperate with the police for fear of incriminating himself, but more importantly, his father. The police have recently interrogated Uri Shani, Ariel Sharon's chief of cabinet, on his role in the affair. Sharon himself is expected to be interrogated within the next weeks. Although the possibility is still a long way off, if an indictment is eventually issued against Sharon, he would have to resign as prime minister.

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