

Arafat health drama: a symbol of Israel's imprisonment of the Palestinian people

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The serious deterioration in the health of Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian National Authority, has brought to the attention of the world something consciously concealed by the western media and its political leaders, namely the deplorable and unconscionable conditions to which the 75-year-old has been subjected by the Israeli government and its occupation forces.

Arafat, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, has been a political figure on the world stage for nearly 40 years. Notwithstanding the *World Socialist Web Site's* longstanding and principled political differences with him and the bourgeois nationalist movement he heads, there is no question that Arafat is seen by millions of Arabs and Palestinians as the living symbol of their struggle against oppression.

Yet the elected leader of the Palestinian people and head of the PNA, a political entity, recognised as legitimate by the United Nations and international law, has been treated as nothing more than a common criminal by the Israeli government.

As part of its efforts to scuttle the Palestinian national movement and sabotage any possibility of an independent Palestinian state, the Israeli government under Ariel Sharon has contemptuously dismissed the popular mandate of the Palestinian masses as an "irrelevance."

Instead, with Washington's backing, Arafat has been increasingly politically marginalized, and held literally at gunpoint, in the PNA's Ramallah headquarters in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Not satisfied with denying Arafat freedom of movement—preventing him from visiting other towns in the West Bank and the entire Gaza strip, Gaza, whose elected representative he is—the Israeli army has mounted numerous attacks on the PNA's buildings and

infrastructure.

In April 2002, the PNA headquarters became the target of a full-scale military assault when the Israeli Defence Force invaded the West Bank, surrounded the building with tanks and armoured vehicles, and subjected it to attack by shells and machine gun fire that wrecked much of its floors and destroyed its electricity and phone lines.

Since that date, Arafat has been imprisoned under conditions of virtual house arrest in the bombed-out compound, with Israel insisting that should he leave the facility, he would not necessarily be allowed to return.

The Israeli authorities have explicitly stated their desire to see Arafat dead. In September 2003, the Israeli deputy Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, publicly declared that the Israeli government intended to assassinate the Palestinian president (i.e., commit what under international law is indisputably an act of terrorism).

Only last month, Sharon reiterated that threat, telling the *Ma'ariv* newspaper that Israel would "operate the same way" against Arafat as it had against Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi—both assassinated by Israel.

The Israeli government has continuously justified its murderous and illegal behaviour on the grounds that the PA leader constitutes an "obstacle to the process of reconciliation and peace."

This from a regime that is responsible for numerous war crimes against the Palestinian people, from the 35-year-long illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and targeted assassinations to such "collective punishments" as the demolition of housing and the lockdown of entire towns, the bombing of crowded residential neighbourhoods and the uninterrupted seizure of Palestinian land.

The Sharon government's real complaint is that Arafat has failed to discharge his responsibility to function as Israel's subcontractor in suppressing the Palestinian resistance and has balked at launching a civil war against his own people.

The inhumane circumstances in which Arafat has been confined has undoubtedly contributed to his failing health, as well as to his difficulty in obtaining the medical care required. Even when his condition took a sudden and precipitous decline over the last week, Arafat's access to treatment has depended entirely on the decisions of the Israeli government.

That the Israeli state should hold the power of life or death over Arafat in such a manner is symbolic of its real relationship to the Palestinians: one of virtually complete dictatorial control. This is the stark political reality which continually fuels the resistance of the Palestinian people.

This situation has largely not been commented on, much less condemned, by western political leaders and the media. Even when it became clear that Arafat's life was immediately endangered, not a single government representative, either in the US or in Europe, made a public demand for Israel to guarantee his immediate and unconditional access to the necessary medical facilities.

This is because they are well aware that Israel has support from the highest levels of the Bush administration and that the murder of political opponents, by whatever means, is now considered a legitimate part of US foreign policy.

If Israel has subsequently shifted its position on allowing Arafat to seek treatment in France and return to Palestine, one can only assume that the Sharon government and its advisors in Washington have reluctantly concluded that the alternative of openly sentencing him to inevitable death in his compound would outrage Arab and international public opinion, with explosive and destabilising consequences across the entire region.

Though not even the Israeli government can dismiss such realities, there is no reason to believe its word can be taken at face value. Already some of Israel's security officials have suggested that they will oppose Arafat's return.

Indeed, the Sharon government's real attitude is shown by the fact that even as Arafat lay unwell in his

HQ, still faced with Israeli intransigence, the IDF was being placed on high alert throughout the Occupied Territories, with instructions to move against angry crowds certain to gather in the event of the Palestinian leader's death.

As the drama of Arafat's illness unfolded, hundreds of IDF troops were continuing to lay siege to the Gaza Strip in a military offensive cynically codenamed "Days of Penitence." Tanks and armoured bulldozers massed on the border, firing rockets into refugee camps and killing men, women and children indiscriminately.

The IDF operation has so far claimed the lives of more than 70 Palestinians, and wounded more than 250. The most notorious incident in the latest repression has been the killing of 13-year old school girl Iman al-Hams. According to reports from Israeli soldiers, the child was shot when she strayed too close to an army checkpoint in Rafah. As she lay on the ground, an IDF commander shot her twice at close range, before spraying her corpse with automatic fire. The commander was initially cleared of "unethical behaviour" in the girl's death by an army investigation.



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