

New York Times' Friedman gloats as Arafat lies near death

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Yassir Arafat's battle against death in a French hospital has elicited a loathsome piece of commentary from the *New York Times'* chief foreign affairs columnist, Thomas Friedman. The *Times* columnist dismisses the Palestine Liberation Organization leader's four decades of struggle as "footprints in the sand," and cheers the predictions of his imminent demise.

"The prospect of his death seemed to unlock more hope and possibilities than the reality of his life," declares Friedman.

While cynicism and contempt are hallmarks of Friedman's writings on the Arab world, one might have expected the *Times* columnist to have more mixed emotions over Arafat's passing from the stage of history. After all, authoring slanders against the PLO leader and the Palestinian people as a whole has served as the touchstone of a journalistic career that has made Friedman a wealthy man.

Despite our principled differences with the bourgeois nationalist perspective of Arafat and the movement he founded, we have no doubt that he will endure as a leading political figure of the 20th century. His steadfastness and heroism in defying overwhelming odds played a major role in preventing the Palestinian people from being erased from history by force of Israeli arms. His "footprints" will be with us long after Friedman's scribbles fade from memory, even as examples of intellectual dishonesty and charlatanry.

The phony premise underlying all of Friedman's attempts to vilify Arafat is the myth that the PLO leader has systematically sabotaged efforts by the United States and Israel to advance a "peace process" that would secure the interests of the Palestinians while ending the Middle East conflict.

In particular, Friedman charges Arafat with having "walked away" from the 1993 PLO-Israeli agreement brokered in Oslo. The deal represented a renunciation of the Palestinian people's claim to all but 22 percent of the land of Palestine. It envisioned a PLO-led interim authority taking charge of security in the Occupied Territories, freeing Israel from the burden of military occupation, while it left the Zionist regime in control of borders, foreign policy and the protection of existing illegal settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

The reality is that Israel reneged on its one significant pledge under the Oslo accords—the halting of its illegal settlement activity. Instead, settlements doubled in size over the next decade. The Zionist regime likewise refused to negotiate on the key issues left unresolved by the deal—the status of East Jerusalem and the right of Palestinians driven from their homeland in 1948 to return.

It was under these conditions, in which the so-called "peace process" had proven itself to be a noose around the neck of the Palestinian people, that the second Intifada erupted in the fall of 2000, quite independently of Arafat. It was Ariel Sharon and the Zionist

regime that deliberately provoked the uprising as a means of scuttling any further negotiations and ending international pressure for Israeli concessions.

Friedman can claim substantial credit for feeding the public a falsified history of these developments, using Arafat as the scapegoat for Israel's crimes. He is regarded by the rest of the corporate media as an authority on these questions, and his lies are regurgitated by print and broadcast outlets across the US and internationally.

In his November 7 column, Friedman writes that Arafat's "corrupt, self-interested rule had created a situation whereby Palestinian aspirations seemed to have gotten locked away with him, under house arrest in Ramallah, well beyond the reach of creative diplomacy. Only human biology could liberate them again—and so it has."

Charging that corruption within the Palestinian Authority (PA) led by Arafat has stymied Palestinian demands for an independent state turns reality inside out. Particularly bizarre is the suggestion that Arafat chose to place himself under Israeli military siege in Ramallah in order to ward off "creative diplomacy."

PA corruption scandals have served as a favorite hobbyhorse of both the Israeli regime and the Bush administration in their attempts to justify Israeli aggression and pressure the Palestinian people into replacing their existing leadership with Quislings under the direct thumb of Washington and Tel Aviv.

The Zionist preoccupation with Palestinian corruption is ironic given the stench of bribery scandals and underworld connections that emanates from the Sharon regime—and, indeed, the Sharon family. As for the US, the pilfering within the PA is less than penny-ante when measured against the scandals surrounding Halliburton, Enron and other politically-connected corporations.

Corruption within the Palestinian Authority was inevitable in the context of continued Israeli military occupation and the powerlessness of the PA regime to resolve any of the immense social problems confronting the 3.5 million people in the Occupied Territories. There is no doubt that far greater levels of fraud and embezzlement would have been cheerfully accepted, had Arafat bowed to Israeli terms and succeeded in containing the resistance of the Palestinian people.

Friedman's strange formulation that "human biology" might now liberate the Palestinian people should be read in the context of his subsequent admission that, "Once it became clear, after the collapse of the Camp David talks, that no deal was possible with Arafat, I wished for his speedy disappearance."

The wish of the *Times* columnist corresponded neatly with the stated aims of the Israeli regime, which repeatedly threatened to effect Arafat's "speedy disappearance" through assassination. Just last September, Sharon stated his intention to "operate the same way"

against the PLO leader as the Zionist regime had done in assassinating Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and other leaders of Hamas.

There are reasons to suspect that “human biology” had less to do with Arafat’s mysterious illness than the designs of the Israeli state—seconded by Friedman—to bring about his “speedy disappearance.” According to sources within the Palestinian leadership, doctors treating him suspect that he may have been poisoned. Arafat has been the target of at least 13 known Israeli assassination plots, three of them involving poison.

One of Friedman’s accusations against Arafat is that he failed to enunciate a “vision for how Palestinians would educate their youth.” He deduced this fact from a Google Internet search—in which he typed in the words “Arafat” “Palestine” and “education.” He reports that he failed to uncover a single speech by the Palestinian leader on the subject.

It is doubtful that Friedman reviewed the 116,000 entries produced by such a search. In any case, as he acknowledges, any such speeches would probably be in Arabic.

No matter. Friedman uses this bit of “investigative journalism” to set up what he no doubt considers one of his more profound indictments of the Palestinian leader: “His obsession was with Palestinian ‘land’, not Palestinian ‘life.’”

Given the present state, as well as the entire history, of the Palestinian people, this is a truly mind-boggling conception. Almost four million Palestinians live in exile, having been driven from their land by a Zionist movement that propagated the myth that Palestine was a “land without people for a people without land.”

(Of course, Friedman has no similar qualms over the Zionist obsession with land—the cornerstone of the entire Zionist enterprise, which began by equating the fate of the Jewish people with the establishment of a Jewish state, and accomplished this goal by exploiting the tragedy of the Holocaust to displace the Palestinians from their land).

For those living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the seizure of the best and most strategic land for Zionist settlements has divided even these small territories into pieces that are regularly sealed off from one another by Israeli military roadblocks and curfews.

This nightmarish condition is now being supplemented with the erection of a “separation wall” on Palestinian land. The wall traps many thousands in totally enclosed enclaves, separating them from their farmlands and work. If there was any illusion before that a viable economy could be developed on the territories of the West Bank and Gaza, the wall has put it to rest.

The Palestinians’ “obsession” over land and occupation is a matter of life and death. Arafat could have given the most eloquent speech on education, but there are stubborn facts that would remain: Palestinian students are being sealed off from schools and universities; these institutions have themselves been subject to attack or closure on orders of the Israeli military; schoolchildren are regularly shot dead by Israeli forces.

Last month, an 11-year-old girl in the Gaza Strip died of wounds inflicted by Israeli army gunfire, shot in the chest while sitting at her desk in a United Nations-run school.

UNWRA, the UN agency that aids Palestinian refugees, was compelled to issue a statement on the atrocity: “It is horrific by anyone’s standards. Schools should be havens of peace. Outside the schools, the pace of child deaths in Gaza has been accelerating terribly in recent weeks. The most basic right of the child, to life, is now being violated almost every day.”

A week later, an 8-year-old girl was machine-gunned to death by Israeli troops as she walked to school. On the day that the *Times* published Friedman’s column, Israeli tanks opened fire on civilian housing in the Gaza town of Rafa, critically wounding a 13-year-old girl.

These desperate conditions facing the Palestinian people could all have been avoided, Friedman asserts, if only Arafat had “had the courage to tell them the truth”—that they were obliged to accept whatever the US and Israel offered—and if he had “adopted the nonviolence of Gandhi.”

There can be no greater hypocrisy than a defender of an Israeli regime that came to power by means of terrorism and violence, seizing the land of another people, preaching to that regime’s victims the virtues of non-violence and submission. What non-violent acts would Friedman support? Would they include millions of expelled Palestinians marching peacefully to reclaim their land? Does he think that the Israeli regime—armed to the teeth by Washington—would respond non-violently?

The *Times* columnist continues: “Arafat’s exit from the stage, combined with the downfall of Saddam Hussein, is a real moment of opportunity for the Arab world.”

The Arab world may be forgiven if it fails to appreciate this “moment of opportunity,” produced by a US military occupation that has claimed 100,000 Iraqi lives and a redoubled Israeli offensive that has sent tanks and troops storming into the towns and villages of the West Bank and Gaza.

The question posed to the Iraqis and Palestinians, according to Friedman, is, “Will they each use this moment to hold elections and build a bridge to a society of institutions and laws...?”

This is not a new idea. The Bush administration also claimed that the issue in the Palestinian territories was elections, until they realized that any democratic vote would result in an overwhelming victory for Arafat. Now Washington is insisting that elections slated for January in Iraq will prove the “success” of the US occupation. This triumph of “democracy” is being prepared with the imposition of martial law and the launching of a bloodbath against Fallujah and other centers of resistance.

The demand for such elections is not a means of ushering in societies of “institutions and laws,” but of providing “democratic” window-dressing for the lawless aggression of US imperialism and its Israeli ally in the Middle East. Friedman’s columns for the *Times* serve the same purpose.



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