

Why Israel will not allow Arafat to be buried in Jerusalem

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With Yasser Arafat lying in a coma in a French military hospital, his eventual burial place has become an issue of burning political dispute.

Arafat's life has come to symbolise the struggle of the Palestinian masses against Israel's occupation and usurpation of their land. In his latter years, this has assumed a largely negative character—in the tragic failure of the bourgeois nationalist programme of Arafat and his Al Fateh to secure a homeland for the Palestinian people.

The response of Israel to his possible demise has again demonstrated that there is no possibility of a just settlement that satisfies the democratic aspirations of the Palestinian masses through negotiations with the Zionist state—the chimera that Arafat has chased for over two decades. All that is on offer from Israel is that the Palestinians be confined to a militarised ghetto on the Gaza Strip and a discontiguous entity on less than half the West Bank entirely surrounded by a hostile Israeli military and the settlements of fanatical Zionists that will control all the most fertile land and the lion's share of water and other resources.

Arafat has for several years expressed the wish that he be buried near the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. But the Israelis will not countenance such a move, as they believe it will be seen as strengthening claims to the traditionally Arab eastern sector of the city as a future capital of a Palestinian state.

The Noble Sanctuary, or Haram al-Sharif compound in east Jerusalem is the most contentious of all possible burial places. The mosque is the third holiest site for Muslims and is supposedly the place from where the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrema Sabri, said Arafat had told him three months ago that he would like to be interred in the compound. "We must, and have to, honour his will," he said.

But Al Aqsa is built on the ruins of the biblical Jewish temples and is revered by Jews as the Temple Mount. The suggestion that Arafat should be buried there, therefore, evoked a fierce response from the Israeli right. National Union Knesset member Uri Ariel warned that "tens of thousands of Jews will come to the Old City in Jerusalem to physically prevent the burial" and activist Baruch Marzel called for a Jewish blockade of any potential funeral procession "in order to prevent the

mass-murderer with the blood of thousands of Jews on his hands to be buried on the Mount."

The government concurred, with an official proclaiming, "It will never happen... one thing is for sure; Arafat will not be buried on the Temple Mount."

Burial on the Temple Mount is not all that is inconceivable for Israel, however. Sharon's government cannot allow Arafat's corpse to be interred anywhere in Jerusalem, nor anywhere on the West Bank.

In July, an official defence establishment report was leaked to the press that detailed possible Israeli reactions to Arafat's death. On the Palestinian leader's desire to be buried on the Temple Mount, the report recommended burying him in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Abu Dis, which overlooks the site.

This too has been rejected out of hand, despite the fact that Arafat's burial plot is about a mile east of Jerusalem's Old City wall and would lie beyond a 24-foot separation barrier currently being built by Israel. Reports have cited Israeli fears that tens or even hundreds of thousands of Palestinians would try to march on Jerusalem bearing Arafat's body. In 2001, thousands of Palestinians joined a procession to bury the Palestinian Liberation Organisation leader Faisal Husseini in a tomb beside his father in the Haram al-Sharif compound.

According to press reports, anonymous Israeli security officials said Gaza was the only burial option that would be contemplated. Arafat's family clan, the Al-Kidwas, is originally from Gaza, though the Palestinian leader spent much of his youth in Jerusalem. The family has a small plot of 25 to 30 graves in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, where his mother, Zahwa, and his sister are buried. But this is situated in the middle of a busy market. Other burial options that have been fielded include a seaside plot next to his old headquarters in Gaza City, or Gaza City's "martyrs' cemetery" east of the city.

The Israeli government cannot contemplate a burial in Jerusalem not only because holding it is of symbolic significance for the Zionists as embodying their supposed biblical claim to Palestine, but because it is a strategic bulkhead for its expansionist aims. Jerusalem occupied a central place in Zionist efforts to establish the state of Israel, following its

proclamation in May 1948. After the defeat of the Arab incursion that year, the Israel-Jordan Armistice Agreement of 1949 formalised the de facto division of the city into the eastern sector, including the Old City, controlled by Jordan (which also controlled the West Bank), and the western sector, or the New City, which was controlled by Israel.

In the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel regained the Jordanian-controlled sectors of Jerusalem and subjected it to Israeli law, jurisdiction and administration. It formally annexed East Jerusalem in 1980, subsequently asserting that “Jerusalem, whole and united, is the capital of Israel” and would “remain forever under Israel’s sovereignty.”

Palestinians claim east Jerusalem (or al-Quds as it is known in Arabic), where over 200,000 Arabs constitute 30 percent of the city’s population, as the capital of the future Palestinian state. They have proposed a compromise of establishing a capital in the Abu Dis suburb of Jerusalem—which would then be renamed Al-Quds. But the Israelis will not contemplate even this alternative. For the Zionists it is no longer a question of refusing to relinquish Jerusalem, but of using the city as a spearhead from which to seize much of the West Bank.

Successive governments, both Likud and Labour, have done everything possible to secure their grip over the eastern part of the city and to consolidate satellite communities built since 1967 within its municipal borders and therefore under Israeli sovereignty.

Numerous measures have been employed to create a dominant and eventually exclusive Jewish population in east Jerusalem and to make permanent Israel’s illegal seizure. Meanwhile, new Israeli colonies have been built and existing ones expanded in and far around the city in order to envelop ever more West Bank land, including Bethlehem—while at the same time disconnecting the northern part of the West Bank from the south as a result of extensive road construction. A second belt of newer settlements is to expand outwards in a “Greater Jerusalem” area and will eventually cover a 100-square miles. So far an additional 200,000 Zionist settlers have been established in the city and its environs.

All this has taken place despite the fact that the Israeli claim to Jerusalem is contrary to international law, which rejects the acquisition of territory by war and considers any changes on the ground illegal and invalid and has been formally opposed by the United Nations.

Moreover, the pace of construction has reached its greatest intensity in the period since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Far from being able to secure a negotiated settlement with Israel, thus ensuring the creation of a Palestinian state, Arafat and his Palestinian Authority was only ever granted partial control of a small fraction of the West Bank and Gaza. And when he failed to clamp down on growing resistance to the Israeli occupation and the terrible social conditions facing the Palestinians trapped in the territories, Arafat was swiftly transformed in Zionist and US propaganda from a Nobel Peace

Prize winning statesman into a “supporter of terror” and a pariah.

Even in death, Israel cannot countenance Arafat’s return to Jerusalem. For to do so could imply recognition of the legal rights of the dispossessed Palestinians to their land. And if the presence of a dead Arafat in either Jerusalem or even the West Bank cannot be contemplated, then there is truly no possibility of Israel ever accepting the creation of a Palestinian state worthy of the name. Like the Palestinian masses, Arafat’s remains must be confined to the ghetto that is the Gaza Strip, while Sharon proceeds with his plan to permanently annex the bulk of the West Bank to a Greater Israel. The re-elected Bush administration has already let it be known that it will ease any pressure on Israel to evacuate illegal outposts and freeze settlement construction in the West Bank, using the excuse that it is giving support to Sharon’s supposed disengagement from the Gaza Strip.

It should be noted that the refusal of Arafat’s probable successors to comment on Israel’s refusal to honour his wish to be buried in Jerusalem speaks volumes of their willingness to comply with whatever edicts are handed down to them from Washington and Tel Aviv. All that has been said by Palestinian minister Saeb Erekat on the issue of Arafat’s burial site is that it was “inappropriate” to discuss it while he is still alive—and this at a time when Israeli politicians and the media are full of ringing anti-Arafat rhetoric on the issue.

Ever since Arafat was taken ill and particularly after he slipped into a coma on November 4, leading figures within Fateh and its rivals in Hamas and Islamic Jihad have been haggling over who should be included in a new “collective leadership”, with pride of place for Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei and former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. Securing the Bush administration’s blessing for their succession is the primary concern for all these figures. And to this end they will accept virtually anything demanded of them, including the humiliation of a burial ceremony for Arafat on Israel’s terms. Their efforts have earned the support of Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, who told Sharon’s cabinet at the weekend that the “old guard has taken matters in hand and is controlling the situation”.

As to Arafat’s burial, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the Israeli government will “allow foreign leaders, including those from enemy states” to attend a funeral in the Gaza Strip, as well as “West Bank and Gaza Palestinians who, are not deemed dangerous”. Alternatively, the security forces are prepared “for the possibility that thousands of Palestinians will try to march Arafat’s body to the Temple Mount for burial.”



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