

Yasser Arafat: 1929-2004

Chris Marsden, Barry Grey

12 November 2004

Yasser Arafat will be remembered as a man of tremendous personal courage and unswerving loyalty to the cause of Palestinian liberation. Millions throughout the world will dismiss with contempt the slanders heaped on Arafat, the international symbol of Palestinian resistance for nearly four decades, by the likes of Ariel Sharon and George W. Bush, war criminals both, who have the temerity to call Arafat a terrorist.

On this question, Arafat himself gave an excellent response in his speech to the United Nations in 1974:

"The difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist lies in the reason for which he fights. For whoever stands by a just cause and fights for freedom and liberation of his land from the invaders, the settlers and the colonialists, cannot possibly be called terrorists... As to those who fight against just causes, those who wage war to occupy, colonise and oppress other people, those are the terrorists. Those are the people whose actions should be condemned, who should be called war criminals; for the justice of the cause determines the right to struggle."

The scale of the mourning amongst the Palestinians shows the deep affection in which Arafat is held. It is, however, above all necessary to draw the political lessons of his tragedy, which is very much the tragedy not only of the Palestinians, but the Arab masses as a whole.

There has never been a lack of courage, sacrifice or willingness to struggle among the brutally exploited working masses of the Middle East. What has been lacking, and which Arafat was unable to provide, is a viable revolutionary perspective for ending imperialist domination and its inevitable consequences—poverty and repression.

The ultimate failure of Arafat's national project cannot be ascribed to the subjective attributes of an individual. In any event, Arafat's strengths and weaknesses reflected the problems and contradictions of the political movement he led.

The impasse which the Palestinian masses face today is not the exception, but rather the rule. Throughout the Middle East, and internationally, the attempt to find a national solution to foreign domination and social injustice has proven to be unviable. Even where national revolutionary movements against colonial rule have succeeded in ending direct foreign domination—as in Algeria—the domination of the transnational banks and corporations has continued, the social conditions of the working class and peasants have remained desperate, and corrupt local bourgeois cliques have replaced the colonial administrators of old.

The root of Arafat's tragedy is the false political perspective upon which his political struggle was based. Even more emphatically today—in a globalised economy dominated by a relative handful of transnational banks and corporations—the fundamental lesson of the twentieth century pertains: the solution to national oppression and social exploitation lies not along a national, but rather along an international and socialist road.

The problem of the Palestinian people is an international problem. It cannot be solved within the existing framework of capitalist nation states in the Middle East, through which imperialism exerts its control. The addition of a Palestinian state to the present equation in the Middle East, even were it to come to fruition, would not resolve the basic problems of the Palestinian masses. The framework itself must be removed, and replaced with a new system that corresponds to the needs of the working

masses. That framework is a United Socialist States of the Middle East. The social force capable of achieving it is the working class, uniting behind it the rural poor, in struggle against both imperialism and the national bourgeois classes of the region.

In one of the great ironies of history, the failure of the Palestinian national program mirrors the debacle of another prominent national movement of the twentieth century—Zionism. The "success" of the Zionist enterprise succeeded in transforming an oppressed people, who suffered one of the greatest tragedies in human history, into the oppressors of another people—the Palestinians.

The history of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and that of Arafat, demonstrates again and again that the subjugation of the Palestinian people was maintained not simply by Israeli violence and military might, but by the treachery of the Arab bourgeoisie. Arafat, who, on the basis of his nationalist program, sought to pressure the Arab regimes and maneuver between them, was never able to establish any genuine independence from either them or their imperialist masters. Likewise, his attempts to rely on the Soviet Union as a counterweight to Israel and the US inexorably led him to seek the patronage of the most determined opponent of the Palestinian and Arab masses—American imperialism.

The Great Catastrophe

Arafat was born in Cairo as Mohammed Abdel Rahman Abdel Raouf Arafat Al Qudua Al Husseini in 1929, to Palestinians who had moved from Gaza two years earlier. His father was a small businessman. After Arafat's mother died, when he was aged five, he was sent to be cared for by relatives in the Old City of Jerusalem. As a teenager, Arafat became closely involved in the struggle for Palestine and never wavered from that commitment.

There existed at that time a powerful class sentiment for uniting Jewish and Arab workers in a common struggle against capitalism, leading to the formation of the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in 1921. But the Stalinist bureaucracy that subsequently consolidated power in Moscow used the PCP to serve its own foreign policy needs, which focused on securing alliances with various national bourgeois regimes in the Middle East as a counterweight to the Western imperialist powers, coupled with the suppression of any independent political initiative on the part of the working class.

Following the Nazi campaign of genocide against the Jews of Europe, which had turned millions into refugees, the Soviet Union joined with the US in supporting the establishment of the state of Israel. As a result, the Zionists were successful in persuading the United Nations General Assembly to vote for the partition of Palestine into two states: one Palestinian and one Jewish. The British quit and the state of Israel was declared in May 1948.

The Palestinians looked to the various Arab regimes to come to their aid. But the armies of the Arab League were not only hopelessly divided

and outnumbered by the Israelis, the imperialist powers were able to rely on appeals to the class interests of the competing Arab bourgeois cliques—their desire for territory, the chance to exploit “their own” workers and peasants, and the establishment of a working relationship with one or another of the major powers.

While some Palestinians fled their homes to avoid the war between Israel and the Arab regimes, many were driven into exile by the Israeli armed forces in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing. The impact of the terror, epitomised by the massacre at Deir Yassin, was described by Arafat. He said of the Zionists: “They occupied 81 percent of the total area of Palestine, uprooting a million Arabs. Thus, they occupied 524 Arab towns and villages, of which they destroyed 385, completely obliterating them in the process. Having done so, they built their own settlements and colonies on the ruins of our farms and our groves.”

Only some 200,000 of the 1,200,000 Palestinians remained in the parts of Palestine that became Israel, where they were treated as second-class citizens. The rest settled in refugee camps in the neighbouring countries, particularly the newly expanded Jordan, which included the West Bank. Their very existence as a people was denied, not just by Israel—whose leader Golda Meir famously proclaimed, “They do not exist”—but also by the Arab leaders, who had no desire to either assimilate the Palestinians or fight to reclaim their land.

Arafat was well aware of the perfidy of the Arab rulers, but from the very beginning he felt he had no alternative but to manoeuvre between them—with disastrous consequences.

Colonel Abdul Nasser, who came to power in Egypt in 1954, aroused popular illusions throughout the Arab world because he carried out a limited program of social and economic reforms which he dubbed Arab socialism, and urged pan-Arab unity under his leadership.

Arafat moved to Gaza, then administered by Egypt, where he became active in the Palestinian paramilitary groups mounting raids against Israel, and joined forces with Abu Iyad and Abu Jihad. Nasser, with economic and military support from the Stalinist regime in Moscow, signed up to a UN-brokered agreement whereby a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) would police Gaza and prevent Palestinian guerillas from mounting raids against Israel. Palestinian guerillas were rounded up and Arafat and his associates found themselves isolated.

In 1957, Arafat and Abu Jihad moved from Cairo to Kuwait and joined with Abu Iyad in founding the Palestine National Liberation Movement, or Al Fateh. The organization advanced a struggle based on one issue alone—the reclamation of the land seized by Israel and the creation of a democratic and secular Palestine.

In 1964, when Israel threatened to divert the waters of the upper Jordan, Egypt was instrumental in setting up the Palestine Liberation Organization under the auspices of the Arab League. Nasser sought to dominate the PLO via its leader, Ahmed Shukairy, and the PLO’s armed forces were part of the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

Fateh joined the PLO, but Arafat was intent on defeating the attempt to neutralize the Palestinian militants and continued to urge armed struggle against Israel. In response, Al Fateh members were subjected to further repression. In Jordan, King Hussein ordered all Fateh militants to be hunted down and captured.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war was a turning point for Arabs and Jews alike. Israel’s destruction of the Arab armies in the space of six days seriously discredited the secular nationalist regimes of Egypt and Syria and their Soviet Stalinist backers. Israel vastly extended its territories, creating another 350,000 refugees and annexing East Jerusalem.

The war signified the end of Nasser’s pan-Arab project. Afterwards, all the Arab bourgeois regimes moved rapidly to the right. Military or military-backed regimes took over in Syria and Iraq, and Egypt became beholden to the oil-rich, conservative and pro-Western states.

Fateh takes over the PLO

The Arab defeat led to the growth of various guerrilla organizations that advocated an independent military campaign for the liberation of Palestine. Henceforth, the struggle against Israel was to be carried out under the banner of Palestinian nationalism, using the guerrilla tactics espoused by the Algerians and Vietnamese.

Fateh emerged as the most important of these guerrilla organizations, particularly after its stand against the Israelis in March 1968 at Karameh in the West Bank. It ousted the leadership of the PLO at a Palestinian congress in Cairo in February 1969 and Arafat became the new PLO chairman.

Fateh’s ranks rose in number from a few hundred to 30,000, and it mounted constant raids against Israel. As a result of its political and military successes, the PLO under the leadership of Fateh was transformed into a genuine mass movement of the Palestinian masses. From the late 1960s on, the struggle of the Palestinian people and the PLO became the catalytic force and focus of revolutionary struggles throughout the Middle East.

The 1970-1982 betrayal

For the ensuing 20 years, the PLO was to suffer repeated attacks at the hands of the Arab regimes: the 1970 “Black September” massacre of Palestinians by Jordan, the complicity of Syria in the Lebanese fascist slaughter of Palestinians at the Karantina and Tel al Zaatar camps five years later, the similar massacres at the Sabra and Shatilla camps in 1982, the refusal of the Arab regimes to oppose Israeli repression in the Occupied Territories up to the present day.

The intervention of Syria against the PLO, which after 1970 was based in Lebanon, was particularly vicious. In the mid-1970s, the PLO was drawn into a widening civil war in Lebanon between left nationalist forces led by Kamal Jumblatt and the fascist Christian Falange. Arafat backed Jumblatt, and the leftist forces were on the point of routing the right wing when Syria intervened against them. The massacres at Karantina and Tel al Zaatar were the product of this betrayal.

In 1982, when Israel, backed by the US, invaded Lebanon in order to expel the PLO, the Syrian bourgeois regime once again demonstrated its hatred for the Palestinian cause by refusing to lift a finger to defend the PLO, which was forced to leave Lebanon and set up new headquarters in Tunis.

It was the Israeli working class that called a halt to the 1982 pogrom at Sabra and Shatilla. Over 400,000 people, one tenth of the population, took to the streets of Tel Aviv in opposition to the Likud government of Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who had allowed the massacre to take place. This was a powerful expression of democratic and progressive sentiment and revealed the potential for forging a united struggle of Arab and Jewish workers. Such a struggle was possible only on the basis of a socialist program that spoke to the class interests of the workers and oppressed throughout the Middle East.

In the aftermath of 1973 “Yom Kippur” war, Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat began to make direct overtures to the US and Israel, culminating in his recognition of Israel at Camp David in 1978. Israel secured the neutrality of the most important Arab country in any future war against its neighbors, thereby isolating the PLO and strengthening its hand against the Palestinians.

Intifada and the collapse of the Soviet Union

By the mid-1980s, major political changes were taking place that were to drive Arafat into the clutches of US imperialism. Most fundamental was the turn by the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev towards capitalist restoration and the reintegration of the Soviet Union into the structures of world imperialism. In 1987, the “USSR signalled it would back a political solution to the conflict with Israel, reduced arms to its traditional clients and expanded diplomatic and economic contacts with Egypt, Jordan and Israel” (Marr & Lewis, *Riding the Tiger*, Westview Press, 1993, p. 92).

Simultaneously, in December of 1987, the Intifada, a spontaneous uprising of Palestinian workers and youth in the Occupied Territories, broke out. This shook not only the Israelis, but also the Arab bourgeoisie and US imperialism, who feared the revolutionary movement would escalate out of control and have a radicalising impact throughout the Middle East.

With all the Arab regimes on which he had relied anxious to make peace with Washington, and the US facing no serious challenge to its dominance in the Middle East, Arafat’s room for manoeuvre had vastly eroded. In December 1988, in a statement dictated word for word by the US State Department, Arafat guaranteed the security of Israel, accepted that a peace settlement with Israel was a “strategy and not an interim tactic,” and renounced all forms of terrorism, “including individual, group and state terrorism.” In frank acknowledgment of his humiliation, when asked at a press conference to declare his acceptance of Israel, Arafat said, “What do you want? Do you want me to do a strip tease? It would be unseemly.”

In a final effort to secure some base from which to oppose the US and Israel, Arafat declared his support for the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein when it was attacked by Washington in 1991. But he found himself utterly isolated, as the Arab regimes prostrated themselves before the US war drive. Once the first Gulf War was over, Arafat was forced back into the negotiations that culminated in the Oslo Accords of 1993.

The terms which Arafat accepted at Oslo that created the Palestinian National Authority (PA) were far removed from Fateh’s stated aim of a democratic, secular Palestine. The PLO-Israeli agreement 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.

Arafat was in effect placed in charge of policing the popular opposition of the Palestinian masses to Israeli occupation and repression.

The so-called “peace process” initiated by Oslo was a fraud. The past decade has been amongst the most bitter experienced by the long-suffering Palestinian people. Their social and economic position is worse today than before the PA was created. They have experienced constant brutality and repeated military incursions, the assassination of their leaders and the consolidation of a corrupt bourgeois layer at the head of the PA that is now preparing to sign off on whatever treacherous settlement is eventually cooked up by the US and Israel.

Israel reneged on its pledge under the Oslo accords to halt its illegal settlement activity and since 1993 the number of settlers has more than doubled under successive Israeli governments. The Zionists have also consistently refused to negotiate on the key issues of the status of East Jerusalem and the right of return for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

Even the limited concessions that were made provoked furious opposition from the Israeli right and settler parties, beginning with the assassination of Arafat’s negotiating partner, Labour Party Prime Minister

Yitzhak Rabin, in November 1995. That act was preceded by frenzied agitation against Rabin by Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the pro-settler Likud Party, leading Rabin’s widow to directly accuse Netanyahu of instigating the murder. The assassination of Rabin marked a shift by the Israeli ruling elite away from any settlement with the Palestinians.

The election of Likud under Netanyahu inaugurated a policy of deliberately sabotaging all negotiations with the Palestinians and demanding ever more onerous concessions from Arafat—to disarm, abandon the right of return and the claim to East Jerusalem—concessions which Arafat was unwilling and incapable of delivering in the face of growing popular opposition amongst the Palestinians.

Discussions led by US President Clinton at Camp David, Maryland, in July 2000 between the PLO and Israel’s Labour Prime Minister Ehud Barak saw Arafat willing to make more concessions than under Oslo, including allowing Israel to annex the most densely populated Jewish settlements and even limitations on the right to return, in favour of compensation from an international fund.

But Arafat could not accept the proposal that the whole of Jerusalem remain under Israeli sovereignty. The talks broke down and hundreds marched in Gaza demanding a resumption of the Intifada against Israel. Arafat was given a hero’s welcome by cheering crowds in Alexandria, Egypt and in the Palestinian Authority because of his refusal to cede to Israeli demands on Jerusalem.

The second Intifada that erupted in the fall of 2000 was deliberately provoked by Likud and Ariel Sharon as a means of ending international pressure for Israeli concessions. Since then, Arafat has been demonised by the Israelis and the Bush administration in the US because of his refusal to suppress the Palestinians with the ruthlessness demanded by them. This is to his credit. But his heirs will have no such compunction. In this, as in all things, it is not the subjective intentions and qualities of individual leaders that are decisive, but the social forces they represent.

It is a tribute to Arafat’s historical role and his fidelity to his people, despite his political limitations, that he was the object of unrestrained hatred on the part of the Israeli and American ruling elites in his final years. There is perhaps no other prominent political figure of the past half-century who endured such persecution as Arafat. He saw the assassination of his closest political allies and comrades, and was himself the target of repeated assassination attempts.

His treatment at the hands of Israel and the US was barbaric. Old and in ill health, he was forced to live for months on end under house arrest in a few rooms in the PA headquarters in Ramallah, surrounded by Israeli troops and deprived of the most basic amenities. Yet he steadfastly refused to leave his post, fearing that the Israelis would never allow him to return.

Even at the end, he agreed to leave Ramallah for medical treatment in Paris only after the Israeli government guaranteed he would be allowed to return. Such was his dedication to the struggle of his people.

Arafat left a conflicted and contradictory legacy. But future generations, in a world purged of imperialist oppression and inequality, will recognize and honor his contribution to the cause of Palestinian liberation. He is one of those rare political figures who will never be forgotten by struggling humanity.



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