

Palestinians turn burial into act of defiance

Tens of thousands mourn Arafat in Ramallah

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The mass outpouring of grief at Yasser Arafat's burial Friday was a powerful assertion of continued Palestinian defiance in the face of Israel's brutal military occupation.

This spontaneous popular demonstration showed Arafat to be a type of political figure that has grown exceedingly rare in the modern era—someone with a genuine mass following who, whatever his faults, is seen to embody the struggles and aspirations of his people.

The tens of thousands of Palestinians who poured into the Muqata, the Ramallah compound, where Arafat was confined under an Israeli state of siege for almost three years, provided a fitting answer to Tel Aviv's and Washington's attempts to slander the Palestinian leader as a terrorist and an "enemy of peace."

The streets of Ramallah were packed from early morning. Mourners scaled the walls of the compound and broke through the gates. Many fired guns into the air as Arafat's coffin arrived on a helicopter following a military funeral in Egypt.

Thousands of Palestinians rushed the helicopter and formed a solid mass in the square. The sea of people barely parted to allow a jeep bearing Arafat's coffin to pass. It then closed back around the vehicle, with thousands chanting "Our blood, our souls, we sacrifice for you, Yasser Arafat," and with many straining to touch the coffin.

The Palestinian Authority declared 40 days of mourning in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the same was done in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan.

In Israel, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced that his government intends to launch a posthumous propaganda campaign aimed at vilifying Arafat as a "strategist of world terror." In Washington, meanwhile, President George W. Bush celebrated Arafat's death as an "opening for peace."

What was the real problem that Israel and Washington had with the man who led the struggle for Palestinian self-determination for over 40 years? He refused to assume the

role of a corrupt stooge. He would not embrace the Israeli-US scheme to confine the Palestinians to walled-in ghettos on the West Bank and Gaza, and he failed to crush the resistance to this scheme amongst his own people.

During the last two decades of his life, Arafat found himself backed into a corner. Due to the limitations and eventual failure of his nationalist programme of establishing a democratic and secular Palestine through armed struggle, he felt he had no choice but to accept many rotten compromises. But he was never prepared to go as far as was demanded of him.

The crowds who gathered to mourn him in Ramallah—as well as the tens of thousands more in other parts of the West Bank and Gaza who were blocked by Israeli occupying forces from marching on the compound and the many who took to the streets of the refugee camps in Jordan and elsewhere—know full well Arafat's faults.

They have all suffered worsening hardships in recent years. Many disagreed strongly with his 1993 decision to sign the Oslo Accords, and most were critical of the state of affairs within the besieged Palestinian Authority. But they have rejected with contempt all those political forces and media pundits that tried to exploit this discontent to attack Arafat for blocking the so-called "peace process."

What the imperialist powers and the Western press portrayed as Arafat's supposed failing—his refusal to fully submit and finally abandon his lifelong commitment to the liberation of his people—is the reason the Palestinian masses are determined to honour his memory.

Few occasions have so dramatically revealed the gulf separating the sentiments of the masses and the official position of the political elites. One can state with absolute confidence that when any of Arafat's imperialist critics and opponents die—a Bush, or a Blair, for instance—few outside of their immediate retinue will give a damn. Certainly, there will be no mass mourning for such insubstantial figures, who rely almost exclusively on the media to lend an appearance of popular support.

The mass outpouring in Ramallah evoked descriptions of “chaos” by the media. On the BBC reporters’ web log one of those in attendance wrote, “This is not going to plan at all. It is all rather undignified now.”

Another added, “It’s undeniable the people have taken over this funeral and made it their own, taking possession every step of the way since Yasser Arafat’s body arrived here.”

At the ceremony’s end, another opined, “Sunset is approaching now. Hopefully now people’s passions and emotions will cool too.”

There was an element of panic amongst those more used to solemn and largely artificial state ceremonies. It was as if they were comparing the burial of Arafat to that of someone like Ronald Reagan, with attendance by a few carefully selected heads of state and other political and diplomatic dignitaries. There was particular concern when some of the mourners began chanting, “To Jerusalem!”

Contrary to their official propaganda, both the US and Israel are well aware of Arafat’s true stature and saw the respect and affection that he evoked from masses of Palestinians as a political threat. That is why Israel would not countenance his last wish to be buried in Jerusalem, and did not even want him to be buried anywhere in the West Bank.

It was Israel’s proposal to bury Arafat in Gaza—the one area that the Sharon government is forced to accept should finally belong to the Palestinians. It was out of fear that any funeral there would quickly erupt into a violent clashes with Israeli troops—a fear that the funeral ceremony showed to be well founded—that the leaders of the Palestinian Authority asked Washington to intervene and urge Israel to accept the burial in Ramallah.

Washington agreed, and Israel fell into line. In the end, Arafat was buried in a stone tomb, so that the PA could promise that his remains would later be moved to east Jerusalem when it finally becomes the capital of an independent Palestine. Soil from the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, where Palestinians hope he will one day be buried, was poured over his coffin.

The Arab bourgeoisie was equally fearful that Arafat’s funeral would turn into a popular demonstration and serve as a reminder of their own innumerable betrayals of the Palestinian cause. They could not contemplate attending a ceremony in which they would be exposed to the Palestinian masses. So Egypt offered to hold a ceremony in Cairo prior to Arafat’s burial in Ramallah.

Most of the world was well aware that, in death, Arafat had to be accorded respect. His body was flown to Cairo,

the city where he was born, on the evening of Thursday, November 11, after a service at a French military base attended by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath.

His coffin was received with full military honours and his widow, Suha, was met by the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s wife Suzanne.

The next day there was a ceremony, which several commentators noted was extraordinarily brief. It was attended by several world leaders, including Jordan’s King Abdullah II, Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki and Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe.

No heads of state from Europe were present, but the European Union foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, and UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw attended. Germany’s Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer was prevented from attending after his plane arrived late.

In a calculated snub, the Bush administration sent only its Middle East envoy, Williams Burns.

The ceremony was held at a mosque inside a military compound near the Cairo airport, deliberately isolated from the general Egyptian population. There was a short funeral procession in which Arafat’s flag-draped coffin was taken to the airport, following a horse-drawn gun carriage and a military band. The streets passed by the procession were closed to the public and guarded by what one reporter described as “vast numbers of security personnel.” All doors and shutters of homes along the route were kept closed.



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