

Palestinian Authority to exhume Yasser Arafat's body to test polonium murder claim

Jean Shaoul
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The Palestinian Authority has announced that it will exhume the body of Yasser Arafat, the president of the PA who died in a French hospital in November 2004. It will investigate the cause of his death, amid claims that he was assassinated with the radioactive isotope, polonium.

Arafat fell ill in October 2004, but was denied medical diagnosis and treatment by Israel. The frail and elderly 75-year-old, lapsing in and out of consciousness, was flown out of the Mukata, his headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah. He had been under an Israeli army siege for more than two years.

Arafat was transferred to a French military hospital to receive diagnostic treatment. He died three weeks later from what the French doctors described as a massive brain haemorrhage. He had suffered intestinal inflammation, jaundice and a blood condition known as disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC), but its cause remained a mystery. French officials refused to say anything more than that he had a “mystery blood disorder”, citing privacy laws, fuelling speculation that he had been murdered.

When Arafat was in hospital, his wife Suha is reported to have told visiting Palestinian officials, “They are trying to bury Abu Ammar [Arafat] alive.” But after his death, she refused to consent to an autopsy. The 558-page medical report on his condition was given to a male relative.

Arafat's remains lie in a mausoleum in the Mukata, which is guarded by troops.

The PA's announcement came in response to a request from Suha for an autopsy to establish the cause of his death. Her request followed an Al Jazeera broadcast of the findings of its nine-month investigation into the Palestinian leader's death. The

news channel revealed that a Swiss forensic institute had examined his medical records and some of his belongings provided by his widow, including his toothbrush, clothes and his kaffiyeh, and detected traces of polonium.

Francois Bochud, director of the Institut de Radiophysique in Lausanne, Switzerland, told Al Jazeera, “I can confirm that we measured an unexplained, elevated amount of unsupported polonium 210 in the belongings of Mr. Arafat that contained traces of biological fluids.”

However, Darcy Christen, a spokesman for the institute, told Reuters that the clinical symptoms in Mr. Arafat's medical reports were not consistent with polonium-210 and no conclusions could yet be drawn as to whether he had been poisoned or not.

Polonium emits highly hazardous alpha radiation, which at high doses causes damage to tissue and organs. This was the same radioisotope used in the assassination of the Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko in 2006.

Mrs. Arafat's request has profoundly embarrassed Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Washington's choice to succeed Arafat in the elections held shortly after his death. The PA has never undertaken any serious investigation into Arafat's death.

Abbas's only possible escape route—refusal to exhume on religious grounds—was blocked when Mufti Mohammed Hussein, the West Bank's top Muslim cleric, said he had no objection to the autopsy.

An autopsy revealing that Arafat did die as a result of polonium poisoning would point to the responsibility of Israel or the United States for his death, given the difficulty of obtaining the isotope. For this reason, an Israeli government official told *Ha'aretz*, “The report is

baseless.”

It was not Israel that had refused to publish his medical records, he added. “Instead of spreading conspiracy theories, the Palestinians could just make the documents public.”

There has long been speculation that Arafat had been poisoned by Israel. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2002 and 2004 and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2003 are on record as having threatened to assassinate him and there are believed to have been numerous attempts on his life.

Arafat, the long-time leader of Fatah, the dominant faction within the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, had been elected chairman of the PA as a precursor to a future independent Palestinian state as set out under the 1993 Oslo Accords. But such an eventuality was anathema to the right-wing settler movement and their leader Sharon.

In September 2000, Sharon, then leader of the opposition Likud party, tore up the Oslo Accords by staging a provocative walk surrounded by security forces through the Temple Mount area in the Old City of Jerusalem. By so doing, he deliberately precipitated the *intifada* that would provide the pretext for a one-sided military confrontation with the Palestinians and its political leadership.

On becoming prime minister in 2001, Sharon set out to sabotage any possibility of an independent Palestinian state. Arafat was increasingly marginalised politically and held at gunpoint in the PA’s Ramallah headquarters in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Arafat was imprisoned within his own compound and prevented from visiting other towns in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while the PA’s buildings and infrastructure were subject to continuous attacks from Israel’s military forces.

In April 2002, the PA’s headquarters became the target of a full-scale military assault when the Israel Defence Forces 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.

Arafat was imprisoned 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 explicitly stated their desire to

see Arafat dead. In September 2003, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert publicly declared that the Israeli government intended to assassinate the Palestinian president.

Just weeks before Arafat’s final illness, 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. Sharon had repeatedly stated that he regretted not killing the Palestinian leader during the siege of Beirut in 1982.

The Israeli government justified this on the grounds that the PA leader was an “obstacle to the process of reconciliation and peace.” But its real complaint was that Arafat had balked at using the PA to suppress the militant opposition to Israel from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Islamic Jihad and Hamas that would have entailed launching a civil war against his own people.

The role of his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, was to move against these organisations, which he did.



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