

Tests show Yasser Arafat was poisoned with polonium

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A Swiss forensic team has published findings strongly indicating that Yasser Arafat, the former President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), was poisoned with the radioactive isotope polonium-210.

Arafat died in a French military hospital in November 2004 after falling ill following a meal at his headquarters in Ramallah, in the West Bank. According to the 108-page report by the University Centre of Legal Medicine in Lausanne, obtained by the news channel Al Jazeera and shown to the *Guardian*, scientists found at least 18 times the normal levels of radioactive polonium in Arafat's remains and in soil stained with his decaying organs.

The scientists were confident up to an 83 percent level that the late Palestinian leader was poisoned.

Their report only addressed the question of what killed Arafat, not whether he was deliberately poisoned or how. But their findings, part of a broader investigation into Arafat's death, mean that the elected Palestinian leader died in office as a result of a political assassination.

After Israel's bombing of his offices in Ramallah in 2002, Arafat was kept a virtual prisoner until his strange and sudden illness, all with Washington's approval.

The Swiss report confirms earlier findings by the same team of traces of polonium in Arafat's personal items that he had used just prior to his death.

Al-Jazeera cited David Barclay, a British forensic scientist, saying, "The report contains strong evidence, in my view conclusive evidence, that there's at least 18 times the level of polonium in Arafat's exhumed body than there should be."

The report represented "a smoking gun... It's what killed him. Now we need to find out who was holding the gun at that time."

Arafat's widow, Suha Arafat, told Al-Jazeera, "This is the crime of the century."

She said she would wait for the results of the French prosecutors' investigation before drawing any conclusions about who was responsible for her husband's death.

Mrs. Arafat had first voiced her suspicions about the cause

of Arafat's illness when Arafat was in hospital in France in 2004, and was reported to have told visiting Palestinian officials, "They are trying to bury Abu Ammar [Arafat] alive."

The 75-year-old Arafat, known to be suffering from Parkinson's disease, was otherwise in good health when he was suddenly taken ill during a meeting, suffering from severe nausea and stomach pain. He was later flown to a French military hospital where his symptoms worsened despite medical treatment, dying a few weeks later.

Rumours mounted that Arafat had been poisoned, as the doctors were unable to identify what had led to a cerebral haemorrhage that caused his death and did not release his medical records. No autopsy was carried out.

No one would have thought to look for polonium as a possible poison. It was only in November 2006, when it was used to kill Russian KGB agent-turned-Kremlin-critic Alexander Litvinenko in London that the suspicion arose that Arafat, who had exhibited similar symptoms, may also have been poisoned with the substance. Litvinenko accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of ordering his murder, but the British government refused to hold a public inquiry into his death after ministers withheld documents that could have shed light on his death.

Following concerns raised by investigative journalist Clayton Swisher, a former US Secret Service bodyguard who became friendly with Arafat, Al Jazeera carried out a nine-month investigation culminating in the film *What killed Arafat?*, shown in the summer of 2012.

It revealed that an examination of his medical records and some of his belongings, including his toothbrush, clothes and his kaffiyeh, contained traces of polonium. This led to the recommendation that his body be exhumed and, at the request of Mrs. Arafat, the opening of an investigation in August 2012 by French prosecutors for suspected murder.

In November 2012, the Palestinian Authority reluctantly allowed Arafat's body to be exhumed for an autopsy.

Mrs. Arafat commissioned a Swiss team and the PA a Russian team to examine tissue taken from Arafat's body,

the tomb and earth. The samples were sent to the three forensic teams in France, Switzerland and Russia.

The Russian team handed in its report on November 2, while it is unknown when the French report will be published because of legal procedures.

Polonium-210 was used as a trigger for early nuclear weapons and later as a power source for satellites and aircraft. Since it is extremely rare—only about 100 grams are produced each year, almost all in Russia—it would have been impossible to obtain without help from a government or access to a nuclear reactor, pointing to an assassination planned and implemented with the help of a nuclear power.

The finger of blame for Arafat's assassination has long pointed at Israel, the sole nuclear power in the region and the chief beneficiary of the demise of a figure who had embodied Palestinian nationalism and the fight against Israeli oppression.

Israel dismissed the report and denied any involvement in Arafat's death. Yigal Palmor, Israel's foreign ministry spokesman, said the Swiss results were "inconclusive, at best," adding that even Mrs. Arafat "understands that the evidence is so scant she cannot point the finger at anybody."

He added, "Even if they did find traces of polonium that could indicate poisoning, there's no evidence of how that poisoning occurred... There's no way the Palestinians can stick this on us."

Israel has long used political assassination to eliminate its enemies, particularly Palestinian leaders. Arafat claimed that former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon tried to kill him on 13 occasions. Sharon told *Bloomberg* journalist Jeffrey Goldberg: "All the governments of Israel for many years, Labor, Likud, all of them, made an effort—and I want to use a subtle word for the American reader—to remove him from our society. We never succeeded."

Sharon bitterly regretted that the Israeli army had not killed Arafat during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Israeli warplanes came close to killing him during the invasion of Beirut when they hit one of the buildings they suspected he was using as his headquarters. Arafat escaped another strike on his headquarters in Tunisia in 1985. He had just gone out running when the bombers attacked, killing 73 people. He narrowly escaped another attempt on his life in December 2001, when he was rushed to safety just before Israeli helicopters fired at his compound in Ramallah.

Palestinian officials have been extremely reticent, testifying to the very real tensions surrounding Arafat's unexplained death. Irrespective of who planned it, someone in his immediate circle would have had to put a tiny dose of the deadly isotope into something he ingested.

The whole affair has profoundly embarrassed Mahmoud Abbas, the PA president and Washington's choice to

succeed Arafat in the elections held shortly after his death. The PA never undertook any serious investigation into Arafat's death. Abbas only agreed to exhume Arafat's body after Mufti Mohammed Hussein, the West Bank's top Muslim cleric, said he had no objection to the autopsy.

Despite the PA having received the report it commissioned from the Russian team, *Wafa*, the official Palestinian news agency, was very non-committal. It stated, "Experts are studying the results in order to inform the Palestinian people of the findings."

Last month, after the publication of a *Lancet* article detailing the 2012 findings of polonium by the Swiss team, the Interfax news agency quoted the head of the Russian team as saying that Russian experts had found no traces of polonium in Arafat's remains. Immediately afterwards, the Russians denied having made any statement.

Ghassan al-Shaka'a, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee from Nablus, said the PA had decided to postpone revealing the test results for a few months for "political reasons." According to the *New York Times*, Tawfik Tirawi, the head of the Palestinian committee investigating Arafat's death, did not respond to a request for comment.

Yesterday, a Palestinian Authority official demanded an international inquiry into the killing of Yasser Arafat, along the lines of the international criminal probe into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.



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