The assassination of Yasser Arafat

Jean Shaoul
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Nine years after Yasser Arafat died in a French military hospital on November 11, 2004, a Swiss team of toxicologists has found traces of the radioactive isotope polonium-210 in his exhumed remains, as well as in his shroud and the soil of his shrine.

A Russian team also found traces of polonium in the body of the leader of Fatah and elected president of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Swiss scientists said there was an 83 percent probability that the late Palestinian leader was poisoned.

Their findings, part of the French authorities' broader investigation into Arafat's death, confirm that the Palestinian leader was assassinated.

As soon as Arafat, who was in good health, became ill after eating a meal at his compound in Ramallah in October of 2004, there were suspicions that he had been poisoned. But it proved impossible to determine whether that was the case. None of the doctors treating him, in Palestine or in France, were able to diagnose the cause of his illness, which was a combination of intestinal inflammation, jaundice and a blood condition known as disseminated intravascular coagulation.

It was only after investigative journalist Clayton Swisher, a former US Secret Service bodyguard who became friendly with Arafat and pressed his suspicions about Arafat's death, that the Qatar-based news channel Al Jazeera launched an investigation. Qatar is now home to and sponsor of Khaled Meshaal and the exiled leadership of Hamas, the offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that rules in Gaza and is opposed to the PA.

Al Jazeera's investigation found traces of polonium in Arafat's personal effects, leading to the opening of a homicide inquiry in France and the exhumation of his body. Such were the tensions between Mrs. Arafat and the PA that she sent samples to Switzerland while the PA sent samples to Russia.

Responsibility for Arafat's death was immediately and with justification attributed to Israel, which assassinated numerous Palestinian leaders, including Arafat's closest collaborator, Abu Jihad.

Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon publicly admitted to having tried unsuccessfully to kill Arafat. The PA leader's assassination became official Israeli state policy.

In September 2003, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert publicly declared that the Israeli government intended to assassinate the Palestinian president, claiming the cabinet's decision to get rid of Arafat was "a decision to remove Arafat as an obstacle to peace."

From virtually the beginning of the Second Intifada in September 2000, Arafat had been kept a virtual prisoner in his bombed-out offices in Ramallah, unable to exert more than minimal control over Palestinian life. The Bush administration backed Israel to the hilt, vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel's decision to get rid of Arafat.

Israel never repudiated the decision. Just weeks before Arafat's final illness, Sharon reiterated the threat to kill him.

Since the 1990s, Arafat had repeatedly sought to arrive at an accommodation with Israel and the United States, and had accepted the creation of the Palestinian National Authority under the Oslo Accords in 1993. In return, he had been charged with policing a restive and impoverished Palestinian population trapped in a de facto prison while their leaders grew fabulously wealthy.

Arafat had nevertheless retained enough of a connection to his revolutionary nationalist past to balk at using the PA to suppress the militant opposition to Israel from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, which would have entailed launching a civil war against his own people.

His death removed that obstacle and cleared the way for the installation of a more pliant leadership under

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Mahmoud Abbas.

After years of denials from Israeli spokespersons, Israeli President Shimon Peres has admitted the truth. In an interview given to the *New York Times* some months ago, which was published only last week, Peres said Arafat should not have been assassinated and asserted that he had opposed the policy of murdering him. Peres stated he had "protected Arafat from several plots against his life."

Arafat's murder testifies to the wholly criminal character of the conduct of Washington and its key allies. It came after the launching of wars of aggression and colonial domination against Afghanistan and Iraq, using the 9/11 attacks as the pretext and employing lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Since Arafat's murder, drone assassination, euphemistically referred to as "targeted killing," has become official state policy of the US as well as Israel.

Responsibility for Arafat's assassination, however, does not end with Washington and Tel Aviv. The manner of his death points to the complicity of elements within the Palestinian leadership, since someone within Arafat's entourage in Ramallah must have administered the poison.

It has taken nine years to identify the cause of death only because the new Palestinian leadership under Abbas did everything it could to block the truth from coming out. The PA did nothing to examine the circumstances of Arafat's death. It refused an autopsy. It wrote to the French authorities asking for further medical information only in 2009, and never asked Mrs. Arafat for materials that might yield forensic clues.

The PA was reluctant to exhume the body and sought a United Nations investigation, along the lines of the tribunal into Lebanese leader Rafiq Hariri's assassination, which targeted Syria, or one by the Arab League.

The assassination of Arafat expresses in full the dead-end of the nationalist perspective that blocks the working class from adopting an alternative to exploitation by their ruling class and by imperialism. It confronts Palestinian workers with the knowledge that the man most closely associated with the struggle for statehood was killed with the collusion of the clique of billionaires that emerged as the leadership of the organisation he created.

In that regard, Palestine is essentially no different from the rest of the Middle East, where venal nationalist leaders serve the interests of the oil companies and banks at the expense of their own working class.

Arafat's assassination confronts Israeli workers with the fact that the Middle East's much-vaunted "sole democracy" is run by military gangsters who function as the guardian of Washington's interests in the oil-rich Middle East, as well as jailers of the Palestinians and exploiters of their own working class.

Only the perspective of socialist internationalism, whereby the working class takes control of the globally organised productive forces created by capitalism to re-organise production on the basis of social need instead of private profit, offers a progressive alternative to economic privation, repression and war.

Workers in Israel/Palestine can realise socialism only by drawing the working class of the entire Middle East, irrespective of religion, sect or ethnicity, into a common struggle against the regional ruling elites and their masters in the United States and Europe.

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