

Yasser Arafat: A Man and his People

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Wherever he may be buried when he passes away, the day will come when his remains will be reinterred by a free Palestinian government in the holy shrines in Jerusalem.

Yasser Arafat is one of the generation of great leaders who arose after World War II.

The stature of a leader is not simply determined by the size of his achievements, but also by the size of the obstacles he had to overcome. In this respect, Arafat has no competitor in the world: no leader of our generation has been called upon to face such cruel tests and to cope with such adversities as he.

When he appeared on the stage of history, at the end of the 1950s, his people was close to oblivion. The name Palestine had been eradicated from the map. Israel, Jordan and Egypt had divided the country between them. The world had decided that there was no Palestinian national entity, that the Palestinian people had ceased to exist, like the American Indian nations – if, indeed, it had ever existed at all.

Within the Arab world the “Palestinian Cause” was still mentioned, but it served only as a ball to be kicked around between the Arab regimes. Each of them tried to appropriate it for its own selfish interests, while brutally putting down any independent Palestinian initiative. Almost all Palestinians lived under dictatorships, most of them in humiliating circumstances.

When Yasser Arafat, then a young engineer in Kuwait, founded the “Palestinian Liberation Movement” (whose initials in reverse spell Fatah), he meant first of all liberation from the various Arab leaders, so as to enable the Palestinian people to speak and act for itself. That was the first revolution of the man who made at least three great revolutions during his life.

It was a dangerous one. Fatah had no independent base. It had to function in the Arab countries, often under merciless persecutions. One day, for example, the whole leadership of the movement, Arafat included, was thrown into prison by the Syrian dictator of the day, after disobeying his orders. Only Umm Nidal, the wife of Abu Nidal, remained free and so she assumed the command of the fighters. Those years were a formative influence on Arafat’s characteristic style. He had to manoeuvre between the Arab leaders, play them off against each other, use tricks, half-truths and double-talk, evade traps and circumvent obstacles. He became a world-champion of manipulation. This way he saved the liberation movement from many dangers in the days of its weakness, until it could become a potent force.

Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, the Egyptian ruler who was the hero of the entire Arab world at the time, got worried about the emerging independent Palestinian force. To choke it off in time, he created the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and put at its head a Palestinian

political mercenary, Ahmed Shukeiri. But after the shameful rout of the Arab armies in 1967 and the electrifying victory of the Fatah fighters against the Israeli army in the battle of Karameh (March 1968), Fatah took over the PLO and Arafat became the undisputed leader of the entire Palestinian struggle.

In the mid-1960s, Yasser Arafat started his second revolution: the armed struggle against Israel. The pretension was almost ludicrous: a handful of poorly-armed guerillas, not very efficient at that, against the might of the Israeli army. And not in a country of impassable jungles and mountain ranges, but in a small, flat, densely populated stretch of land. But this struggle put the Palestinian cause on the world agenda. It must be stated frankly: without the murderous attacks, the world would have paid no attention to the Palestinian call for freedom.

As a result, the PLO was recognized as the “sole representative of the Palestinian people”, and thirty years ago Yasser Arafat was invited to make his historic speech to the UN General Assembly: “In one hand I carry a gun, in the other an olive branch...”

For Arafat, the armed struggle was simply a means, nothing more. Not an ideology, not an end in itself. It was clear to him that this instrument would invigorate the Palestinian people and gain the recognition of the world, but that it would not vanquish Israel.

The October 1973 Yom Kippur war caused another turn in his outlook. He saw how the armies of Egypt and Syria, after a brilliant initial victory achieved by surprise, were stopped and, in the end, defeated by the Israeli army. That finally convinced him that Israel could not be overcome by force arms.

Therefore, immediately after that war, Arafat started his third revolution: he decided that the PLO must reach an agreement with Israel and be content with a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

That confronted him with a historic challenge: to convince the Palestinian people to give up its historic position denying the legitimacy of the State of Israel, and to be satisfied with a mere 22% of the territory of pre-1948 Palestine. Without being stated explicitly, it was clear that this also entails the giving up of the unlimited return of the refugees to the territory of Israel.

He started to work to this end in his own characteristic way, with persistence, patience and ploys, two steps forwards, one step back. How immense this revolution was can be seen from a book published by the PLO in 1970 in Beirut, viciously attacking the two-state solution (which it called “the Avnery plan”, because I was its most out-spoken proponent at the time.)

Historic justice demands that it be clearly stated that it was Arafat who envisioned the Oslo agreement at a time when both Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres still stuck to the hopeless “Jordanian Option”, the belief that one could ignore the Palestinian people and give the West Bank back to Jordan. Of the three recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, Arafat deserved it most.

From 1974 on, I was an eye-witness to the immense effort invested by Arafat in order to get his people to accept his new approach. Step by step it was adopted by the Palestinian National Council, the parliament in exile, first by a resolution to set up a Palestinian

authority “in every part of Palestine liberated from Israel”, and, in 1988, to set up a Palestinian state next to Israel.

Arafat’s (and our) tragedy was that whenever he came closer to a peaceful solution, the Israeli governments withdrew from it. His minimum terms were clear and remained unchanged from 1974 on: a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem (including the Temple Mount but excluding the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter); restoration of the pre-1967 border with the possibility of limited and equal exchanges of territory; evacuation of all the Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territory and the solution of the refugee problem in agreement with Israel. For the Palestinians, that is the very minimum, they cannot give up more than that.

Perhaps Yithak Rabin came close to this solution towards the end of his life, when he declared on TV that “Arafat is my partner”. All his successors rejected it. They were not prepared to give up the settlements, but, on the contrary, enlarged them incessantly. They resisted every effort to fix a final border, since their kind of Zionism demands perpetual expansion. Therefore they saw in Arafat a dangerous enemy and tried to destroy him by all means, including an unprecedented campaign of demonization. So Golda Meir (“there is no such thing as a Palestinian people”). So Menachem Begin (“Two-footed animal...the man with hair on his face...the Palestinian Hitler”), so Binyamin Netanyahu, so Ehud Barak (“I have torn the mask from his face”), so Ariel Sharon, who tried to kill him in Beirut and has continued trying ever since.

No liberation fighter in the last half-century has faced such immense obstacles as he. He was not confronted with a hated colonial power or a despised racist minority, but by a state that arose after the Holocaust and was sustained by the sympathy and guilt-feelings of the world. In all military, economic and technological respects, the Israeli society is vastly stronger than the Palestinian. When he was called upon to set up the Palestinian Authority, he did not take over an existing, functioning state, like Nelson Mandela or Fidel Castro, but disconnected, impoverished pieces of land, whose infrastructure had been destroyed by decades of occupation. He did not take over a population living on its land, but a people half of which consists of refugees dispersed in many countries and the other half of a society fractured along political, economic and religious lines. All this while the battle for liberation is going on.

To hold this packet together and to lead it towards its destination under these conditions, step by step, is the historic achievement of Yasser Arafat.

Great men have great faults. One of Arafat’s is his inclination to make all decisions himself, especially since all his close associates were killed. As one of his sharpest critics said: “It is not his fault. It is we who are to blame. For decades it was our habit to run away from all the hard decision that demanded courage and boldness. We always said: Let Arafat decide!”

And decide he did. As a real leader, he went out ahead and drew his people after him. Thus he confronted the Arab leaders, thus he started the armed struggle, thus he extended his hand to Israel. Because of this courage, he has earned the trust, admiration and love of his people, whatever the criticism.

If Arafat passes away, Israel will lose a great enemy, who could have become a great partner and ally.

As the years pass, his stature will grow more and more in historical memory.

As for me: I respected him as a Palestinian patriot, I admired him for his courage, I understood the constraints he was working under, I saw in him the partner for building a new future for our two peoples. I was his friend.

As Hamlet said about his father: "He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again."

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