Arafat's Troubled Legacy:

Failed Leadership

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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Yasser Arafat was the revolutionary who could not live without a revolution.

Nobody can take from this iconic leader the fact that he spearheaded and embodied Palestinian nationalism, bringing the cause to the world's attention.

He was also the symbol of defiance, once called "the stone we throw at the world."

He extricated Palestinian nationalism from vagaries of inter-Arab politics in the wake of the Arab states' disastrous performance during the 1967 war with Israel.

In the years of struggle, he became a very successful rallying point for Palestinian aspirations.

This aspect of his legacy, however, could have been written about Arafat in the 1970s.

Arafat functioned best as a symbol and worst as a leader. He never evolved. Different aspects of his legacy are not as flattering.

He failed in attaining the goal he set for himself, the establishment of a state in his lifetime.

Many, including President Bill Clinton, scored Arafat for not saying yes to statehood in the final months of the Clinton presidency, which would have ended the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

If he did not like what was offered, he could have counter-offered at the table and not in the streets, where he pointedly refused entreaties from leaders around the world to halt or at least delegitimize violence of the second intifada. As such, the occupation and Israeli settlements are part of his legacy.

Gen. Anthony Zinni, the last U.S. mediator to meet with Arafat in early 2002, said after meeting him, "I don't think he cares about the state. I think he cares about legacy." Indeed, after providing a prize to Palestinian poet Samih Qassem in 1999, the poet took out a pen and reminded Arafat that he would criticize him if he strayed.

Arafat took a pistol from his bodyguard's holster. Then he handed Qassem the pistol and said, "You can also correct me with this." It is hard to escape the conclusion that he defined success very differently from the way others defined it for him. For the world, Arafat's success is about what he gained, territorially and economically. But for Arafat,

success was about what he did not give away so as not to be accused by Arab history of undue compromise.

He preferred the politics of grievance over the politics of governance. He would not be bogged down with details such as economics. When CNN's Christiane Amanpour asked him in 2000 how he was materially improving the lives of his own people, he waved her away, saying, "They don't care about that. They care about the 'Terre Sancta' [Holy Land]."

Publicly, Arafat would famously declare fealty to the "peace of the brave," but he studiously avoided conditioning public attitudes toward peace. He pointedly did not equate the peace process with reconciliation, but at best with decolonization. It is interesting that the first office of Fatah that Arafat opened was in post-colonial Algeria in the early 1960s. His strategic refusal to equate peace with reconciliation gutted any hopes that a deal between governments could be transformed into a more meaningful--and lasting--peace between peoples. This failure was critical, for arguments over the permanence and legitimacy of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East remain at the very heart of the Arab-Israel conflict. At Camp David, he denied the core of the Jewish faith by stating that the Temple was in Nablus rather than in Jerusalem. On another occasion, he said it was in Yemen. This whole approach would diminish his signing of the 1993 Oslo accords, which was important as a first step toward any peace in the future. Arafat's consent to these accords, however, was also a personal political lifeline for him after being marginalized in the aftermath of the last Gulf War, when he sided with Saddam Hussein.

Israelis undoubtedly made many mistakes in the aftermath of Oslo. But nothing so doomed the effort in the '90s as Arafat's refusal in the aftermath of the famed handshake to use his stature as leader of the Palestinians or the state-run media at his complete disposal to genuinely delegitimize suicide bombing against innocent civilians. He refused to say it was morally wrong or even counterproductive to the Palestinian cause. In his early years, terror was his trademark. In the last decade or so, he would sometimes condemn the attacks, but those condemnations would ring hollow. He not only refused to delegitimize them but, to the contrary, called the attackers martyrs. In the last few years, he regularly exhorted, as he told Al-Jazeera satellite television from his battered headquarters in Ramallah, "to Jerusalem, we march martyrs by the millions." Palestinian jails, even in the good years, were called "revolving doors" for killers.

One aspect of Arafat's legacy that could be very ominous is that his maximalism on the issue of refugees will tie the hands of his successors. Any peace deal would enable refugees to immigrate to Palestine, but for Arafat millions of Palestinians had an inalienable "right of return" to Israel, which would eliminate the state's existence. Explaining why he did not accept any compromise offered by Clinton or a last-ditch Taba accord, he told Palestinians in 2001, "I say the right of return is a sacred one. Whoever doesn't like it can go drink from the sea."

It is crucial for the U.S. to be involved and to rebuild the shattered partnership after the terror and violence in the last several years, to end the tragedy for both peoples and to give dignity to both in a two-state solution. This will be much harder, however, because it requires overcoming the very problematic legacy of Yasser Arafat.

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