

## Death of a Symbol:

# Yasser Arafat Leaves Behind a Complicated Legacy of Nationalism and Terrorism

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### Articles & Testimony

**F**ew people can remain indifferent to Yasser Arafat. For many Palestinians, he has been their symbol of defiance, who raised the Palestinian cause to the international stage, and brought his people to the gates of Jerusalem. For President Bush and for the Israelis, Arafat's persona as a terrorist has been revived with the searing Palestinian-Israeli violence. In addition, Arafat has his share of militant Arab detractors who feel that his dalliance with diplomacy made him a traitor to the Arab cause in Palestine. Nevertheless, whether he is seen as a hero or as a villain, it is clear that despite half century of leadership in the Palestinian struggle for national independence, he failed in attaining the goal he set for himself, the establishment of a state in his own lifetime.

Arafat functioned best as a symbol and worst as a leader. In the years of struggle, he became a very successful rallying point for Palestinian aspirations. In times of crisis, Arafat was a survivor whose courage and steadfast calm raised him to iconic status. Under siege in Beirut in 1982 or under house arrest in Ramallah twenty years later, he remained calm and collected. He thrived under pressure; the world may have seen these events as defeats for the Palestinian people but Arafat made his persistent survival in the face of adversity the benchmark for success. In an interview with Lebanese television during the recent violence, Arafat could feel justified in declaring, "While leaving Beirut, I was asked where I was going. I said I was going to Palestine. Each Palestinian is Yasser Arafat, who is part and parcel of the Palestinian people, the great people, who will stand fast until doomsday."

As a leader though, whether in times of war or in times of peace, Arafat never had the capacity to translate his symbolic leadership into concrete achievements on the ground. His life was dominated by waging relentless struggle involving terror against Israel. In his sudden role as peacemaker, he ignited much hope among Israelis and Palestinians but ended up a failure as well. In 1993 when Palestinians and Israelis held dramatic, secret talks in Norway, culminating in a rub-your eyes historic, angst-ridden handshake with nemesis Yitzhak Rabin on the south lawn of the White House the agreement seemed to be a testament to the idea that history can give a reprieve, or in Arafat's case, several reprieves. On that sun-drenched day, there was hope that the long suffering Middle East might actually come to a fresh start.

Always vilified during his adult life as a terrorist, Arafat was suddenly feted and welcomed to the Oval Office -- making 12 such visits during the Clinton presidency. A year after the famed handshake, he was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, a billing he shared with Rabin and Shimon Peres. Yet, events on the ground were not as transformative. While Palestinians made territorial gains in parts of the West Bank -- fully or partially controlling 40% of the land including areas near Jerusalem, before so-called final status issues were to settle the core issues including the final disposition of the land, problems continued.

The Oslo accord was a test of Arafat's ability to make the transition from a revolutionary to a nation-builder. Arafat failed the test; he did not work to instill confidence in the Israelis nor did he show his own people a commitment to building a real state. For the majority of his tenure as leader of the Palestinian Authority did not face down rejectionist groups like Hamas. Suicide bombings became common during his tenure. Normally he did condemn these attacks verbally, but he only episodically pursued the perpetrators. When he did arrest them he often released them soon after. The Israelis charged malice, believing he cynically used violence as a tool to pry further concessions. Whether Arafat intentionally encouraged violence or whether he simply did not crack down on it, it is clear that he never conditioned his public for an era of peace. When holed up in Ramallah after a Hamas suicide bombing, he told Al-Jazeera satellite television interviewer, "to Jerusalem, we march martyrs by the millions."

Publicly he would famously declare fealty to the "peace of the brave", but he studiously avoided talking about reconciliation and felt far more comfortable talking about "struggle". This undefined struggle meant different things to different people: Islamicists and others hoped the struggle was to end Israel's existence, while Palestinian nationalists believed the battle was for the West Bank and Gaza. The net effect of avoiding reconciliation was to undermine trust between Israelis and Palestinians.

Moreover, Arafat did not believe his job was to ensure good governance for a viable state. He saw himself as one of the great Arabs of history, a modern Saladin. He would not be bogged down with details like economics, publicly denigrating interviewers who asked him about such mundane things. While Oslo mandated that he take office through elections, his style of management demonstrated an authoritarian streak. He had dozens of security agencies all answering only to him. To ensure the loyalty of his people he used his iconic status but also obtained allegiance through guns and money. Arafat's own parliament issued a report complaining about the corruption of his regime. According to reliable polling data, their view of his style of government was shared by 83% of Palestinians. This led a senior Bush's Administration official who met him several times say, "I don't think he cares about the state. I think he cares about legacy." Leading Palestinian political analyst and pollster Khalil Shikaki wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that the outburst of violence that exploded in the fall of 2000 was as much a result of dissatisfaction with Arafat's domestic governance as it was a frustration with the pace of peacemaking.

Which is not to say that Israel is blameless with regard to the failure of Oslo. Rabin, also afraid to take on his rejectionists, refused to include a freeze of Jewish settlers in the Oslo accord. The net effect was that the number of settlers virtually doubled from 1993 to 2000. Israelis excused settlement building by pointing out that most, though admittedly not all, of the settlement activity was in a small area close to the border which was destined to be part of Israel as part of territorial swaps in any final settlement. Moreover, they say there is no equivalency between life-taking bombs and bulldozers, whose facts can be reserved. As suicide bombing increased, so did Israeli checkpoints on roads leading into sovereign Israel. Though Israel saw these checkpoints as necessary security measures, the Palestinians saw them as a burden and a daily humiliation which only exacerbated tensions further.

Nonetheless, it was Arafat who rejected the far-reaching peace proposal that Clinton laid out at the end of his administration. Historians may furiously debate what happened at the high-stakes summit convened at Camp David in July of 2000 and in the ensuing six month period of feverish diplomacy, but two things can be stated with relative certainty. It was Arafat who never clamped down on the violence once the intifada broke out two months after Camp

David, and who never agreed to Clinton's terms.

The plan that Clinton presented during the waning days of his presidency was the most detailed US blueprint ever laid out for the Palestinians. It would give the PA 97% of the West Bank, all of Gaza and half of Jerusalem. Still, Arafat rejected the deal. Despite the efforts of diplomats of all stripes in the ensuing years to try to get Arafat to say yes, in public he consistently continued to reject any possible peace proposal. His refusal to compromise on refugees made any resolution impossible. All of the proposals, laid out during or after Camp David, would permit 3.7 million Palestinian refugees to immigrate to the new state of Palestine. Yet for Arafat, the refugees should have received a comparable "right of return" to Israel. He underlined his intransigence by stating, "I say the right of return is a sacred one. Whoever doesn't like it can go drink from the sea," while in a Gaza speech he explained his rejection of the last-ditch deal constructed at the Egyptian resort of Taba, he dismissed the Israeli compromises on refugees as insufficient." Looking back on Arafat's approach to the refugee issue, prominent Palestinian intellectual Sari Nusseibeh, said this stance was "crazy" since, from an Israeli point of view, it could only spell the end of Israel as a Jewish state.

In addition, Arafat rejected any shared arrangement for Temple Mount/Haram el-Sharif, stating that the area must be under total Arab sovereignty. As a man whose upbringing melded religion and nationalism as part and parcel of the same thing, Arafat believed that history was on his side anyhow and so compromise was not necessary. Akram Haniyeh, one of Arafat's aides during Camp David recalls that Arafat told him, "listen, if I'm not the one who liberates Jerusalem and raises the Palestinian flag there, another will come one day to liberate it and raise his country's flag there." Arafat was willing to wait. Therefore, 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.

When violence broke out in September 2000 after Ariel Sharon's walk on the Temple Mount/Haram el-Sharif that is holy to both religions, Arafat refused all entreaties to intervene and halt the violence. Instead, he rode the wave believing that to remain the legitimate leader of the Palestinian people he simply had to be the drum major no matter which way the parade was heading. This method had worked for him in the intifada of 1987 and he expected it to work again in 2000. It did not. Israeli military officials insisted that Arafat not only made no attempt to halt it but that he was actively fueling it in order to extract further concessions from the Israelis. However, this failure to stop the violence and build up national support for peacemaking finds critics among the Palestinians as well. As the violence completed its second year, Prof. Yezid Sayigh, a Palestinian military historian at Cambridge University said, "the Palestinians must come to terms with Israel and develop central political institutions that will be able to provide support for an agreement with Israel. So far, they have not managed to do so. The era of Oslo is over. Arafat is over; he is finished."

Theories abound for Arafat's behavior as a leader. Some would say he was far more ideological than either the Americans or Israelis suspected, and that he defined success very differently from the way others defined it for him. For the Israelis, Arafat's success is about what he gains, for Arafat, it is about what he does not give away. As such, Arafat sees his unwillingness to compromise as a successful conclusion to the Camp David talks. He retained his ideological commitment to the two key sticking points of the negotiations. According to this view, he was guided by his upbringing in Jerusalem and to the fact that the refugees were his core constituency before the West Bank and Gaza were returned by Israel he could not give up on either issue without seeing himself as a traitor to his people. Moreover, according to this view, Arafat's biggest stumbling block was something more basic, his inability to accept that once all the concessions were made, the conflict would be over and Israel's moral legitimacy would be guaranteed. Not only would compromise on these issues be a betrayal of the Palestinian cause, but it was also unnecessary. For Arafat, it seemed that negotiations were simply a stopgap measure to buy time while history played its course and brought about a more favorable outcome. Indonesia's ex-President Abd Rahman Wahid said in a

recent interview that Arafat visited his office in Jakarta after Camp David and, "Arafat confessed to me that in a 100 years, Israel will disappear. So why hurry to recognize it?" From this point of view, it was more important for Arafat not to betray his people than to bring his people to an agreement with the Israelis. After providing a prize to a Palestinian poet Samih Qassem in 1999, the poet took out a pen and reminded Arafat that he would criticize him if he strayed, Arafat then took a 16 mm pistol from his bodyguard's holster. Then he handed Qassem the pistol and said, "You can also correct me with this."

Others see Arafat as the world's quintessential survivor. From this point of view, the more adept he became at survival the less effective he was as a leader. Survival, for Arafat, meant that he could not impose discipline on radicals. Throughout his life, he feared the militants, and rarely stood up to them directly unless they posed a threat to his own survival. According to this school of thought, he could not betray his people, not because of a personal attachment to the issues at hand but because he was frightened of what would happen to him if he disappointed them. This was partially a self-fulfilling fear. The longer he waited to condition his people for peace, the less likely it became that he could ever convince them to accept a compromise. Shortly after Camp David, Arafat told an American interviewer that at the summit he told Clinton that if he signed, "I will go and have coffee with Yitzhak Rabin in heaven".

As much of Yasser Arafat's life would be controversial, his birth was no exception. According to an Egyptian birth certificate, Arafat was born in Cairo on August 24, 1929, and called Mohammed Abdel Raouf Arafat al-Kudwa al-Husseini, (names include name, father's name, and extended family). He later would be nicknamed Yasser, meaning easy. Arafat, however, would later insist that his mother Zahwa, gave birth to him on August 4th of that year in the Old City of Jerusalem at the home of his uncle, who lived adjacent to the Temple Mount/Haram. When Arafat's mother died of kidney failure when he was four, his father sent him and his younger brother Fathi, the sixth and seventh of the Arafat children to live with his maternal uncle in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was during this time including the eruption of the Arab Revolt of 1936.

Another important factor which impacted young Yasser's thinking was a maternal relative, who was one of the chief advisors of the exiled Palestine's Grand Mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husseini. The fiery, Jerusalem-based Mufti led the opposition to the budding Zionist enterprise, and rejected early efforts by the British in the late 30's to partition Palestine. During World War II, the Mufti traveled to Berlin to enlist Nazi Germany in the Palestinian cause. After WWII, the Mufti was exiled to Cairo and this as a top aide introduced a teenage Arafat to ideas of Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. Here too Arafat, who provided minor assistance, was taught that religion and nationalism were inseparable-a lesson he would not forget.

Yet, after not too long and as the prospect of a Zionist state became increasingly real, the teenage Arafat reportedly increased his activities in the name of the Palestinian cause by collecting rifles and forwarding them to Beduoin tribesman, whom he expected to assist Palestinian efforts in opposition. While at one point Arafat was so forlorn over the Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in 1948, that he applied to the University of Texas. Nevertheless, the next whiff of rebellion that Arafat would taste would not be in Palestine but in Cairo which was in the throes of revolution due to anti-colonialist dissatisfaction with Britain and the end of days feel of the ancient regime of King Farouk. A driving force of the revolution was the Moslem Brotherhood that among other things, had championed the Palestinian cause since the mid-30's. Arafat was drawn to the group's cocktail of nationalism and anti-colonialism with its emphasis on the political resurgence of Islam.

As Arafat's commitment to the Palestinian cause grew, he developed an uncanny ability to fuse symbolism and drama in a way which made it possible for Moslems all over the world to identify with Palestinian national aspirations and which garner him foreign support. In the mid-50's, when joining a Palestinian student delegation during a trip to Prague's International Students Congress, Arafat sought admission to Palestine as a full-member. In

order to attract international attention at the conference to his cause, he suddenly wore a kaffiyeh head covering which he would later tie sharply, and which he later said was shaped like a map of Palestine. The kaffiyeh had been the headgear of Arabs revolting against the Zionists and British in the 1930's and was seen as a symbol of defiance, and Arafat found this to be an appropriate symbol. This would not be Arafat's only signature style: over time, his mustache morphed into a stubbly beard, and he took up wearing khaki military fatigues and a pistol. These trappings were meant to contribute to his revolutionary persona.

Throughout his life, Arafat equated Zionism with colonialism. During this early period, the young Arafat literally thought Jews should be thrown in the sea. Bed-ridden with a virus in a Prague hospital along with fellow students one German student activist and subsequent poet Peter Ruehmkorf who recalls being in the same hospital room with Arafat. In his autobiography, Ruehmkorf recalls Arafat, who referred to himself as Mr. Palestine, trying to communicate with him. "With extravagant gestures, he began to drive the Jews (that was me) into an imaginary sea (to the right of my bed) in the process of which he absentmindedly turned my bedcover into a map with already occupied towns here, high points still to be captured there, and my dressing gown as the center of resistance."

Having graduated Cairo University, Arafat moved to Kuwait where he worked as an engineer. While there is no evidence to suggest that there was ever any substance to Arafat's frequent boasts that he gained wealth as an engineer, but he was earning a living there. In Kuwait he met a group of fellow Palestinians and worked with them to found Fatah meaning conquest, which was the reverse acronym in Arabic for Palestine Liberation Movement. Given the potential sensitivity of the Palestinian issue for Arab regimes, the leaders each took up a nom de guerre. Arafat becomes Abu Ammar, named after an unrelenting contemporary of the Prophet Mohammed, Ammar bin Yasser. This nom de guerre, for Arafat, demonstrated his revolutionary credentials while enabling his nationalist cause to resonate with Moslem traditionalists.

The unheard of idea of an independent Palestinian movement began to gain steam among Palestinians due to two opposing factors,; a sense that Nasser's revolutionary ardor was flagging as demonstrated by the break-up of his pan-Arab vision for a united Egypt and Syria in the early 60's and due to the revolutionary success story of Algeria's struggle for independence. Arafat made it clear that he viewed the Algerian model as the ideal for Fatah by establishing its first office in Algeria. The new organization would base its early guerilla training in Algeria, where, the following summer, it trained 100 fighters.

However, Arafat's new venture was quickly complicated by the fact that Arab leaders wanted to co-opt the Palestinian cause for their own purposes. Seeking to demonstrate his commitment to the Palestinian cause, Egypt's Nasser had been considering the formation of a Palestinian movement. In 1964, he decided to act on this idea. At an Arab summit meeting he appointed a blustery lawyer and diplomat named Ahmed Shukeiri as the head of a new organization called the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At the founding meeting of Nasser's new liberation movement, its membership passed a resolution in which they stated that only the Jews who arrived in Israel before 1917 could stay there, all others would have to leave. There was no room for a state of Israel in Palestine.

Arafat saw the PLO for what it was, namely a puppet of Arab states, which viewed his struggle as nothing more than a symbol to be manipulated to burnish their own power. This unease with Arab heads of state has been a constant in Arafat's life as he has tried to figure out how to garner their support without coming under their control. Over time, he would seek to carve out a niche of independence by constantly maneuvering between sources of Arab support without committing to any one Arab ally.

In the case of the new PLO threat he decided that the best way to put his own organization in the forefront and gain adherents for Fatah was to immediately engage in attacks against Israel. In other words, Arafat felt that attacking Israel was good Palestinian politics. Yet, some of Arafat's colleagues were skeptical that he had the capability to effectively launch attacks since his organization consisted of only 26 fighters who were poorly armed. They feared if

they failed, Fatah's reputation would be undermined. Thus, Arafat agreed that the attacks should be conducted by a fake organization called Al-Asifa, or "the Storm." A colleague cited Arafat as saying, "if Al-Asifa succeeded, Fatah would then endorse the armed struggle. If Al-Asifa did not succeed, then Al-Asifa would take responsibility for the failure and not Fatah." This strategy would be repeated with deadly results throughout Arafat's career. Despite the fact that al Asifa's early raids were utter failures (Lebanese authorities stopped the first raid and a Jordanian shot another fighter), Arafat proceeded to make outsized claims of success. He predicted that the money would begin to flow once they started to kill, no matter how small his actual effect. He was right.

However, Arafat's insistence on independent action quickly put him at odds with Egypt and Syria. In the end though, it was be the Arab leaders whose reputations were tarnished by devastating loss of the Six Day War in 1967 in which they were forced to cede East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights. With this defeat, it became clear to the Palestinian people that they could no longer count on the Arab heads of state to take up their struggle. The main beneficiary of this shift would be Arafat. Soon after the war, Arafat personally made secret forays into the West Bank from a new base in Jordan and hiding in the countryside. He established contacts with local Palestinian residents. Heretofore, he was an anonymous revolutionary, but this would dramatically change. Arafat succeeded in catapulting himself to international headlines by the spring of 1968. After a Fatah land mine blew up an Israeli school bus with children inside, Arafat expected an Israeli retaliation on Jordanian soil. Arafat tipped off the Jordanian Army, and urged some Fatah fedayeen to face Israel in a pitched battle in the Jordanian town of Karameh. The Jordanian Army suffered the brunt of the casualties(207 fatalities), yet the heretofore invincible Israel was bloodied (29 killed). Arafat, though he lost far less men than the Jordanian army, 98 fighters all told, was stunningly successful in claiming credit for the attack. Two top aides to King Hussein Zeid Rifai and Adnan Abu Odeh insisted that Arafat was not even at Karameh, but it did not matter. Arafat presented himself to his own people and the world as the person who redeemed Arab honor after the humiliating defeat nine months earlier. His picture suddenly appeared on the cover of Time. Within a year, Arafat took over the PLO.

In short order, Arafat and an assortment of his rival, more radical Palestinian factions began asserting control in the Jordanian capital Amman, which included a heavy concentration of Palestinian refugees in a country where about two thirds of the citizens were of Palestinian descent. Arafat suddenly came to head a chaotic state within a state, which was something he would repeat in other states with repeatedly horrendous results. Palestinian factions set up roadblocks, extorted citizens, and began shooting at Jordanian officials. Even King Hussein's car was ambushed. The King's first response was to try and co-opt Arafat, whom he saw as the most moderate of the Palestinian leaders. Arafat did, in fact, agreed repeatedly to a cease-fire, but never actually tried to enforce it. Jordanians charged Arafat with duplicity, but it is also possible that he was simply too weak to act and decided that the only way he could remain at the helm was if he tried to keep all the interested parties happy. For the first time, Arafat was demonstrating his tendency to prize his own survival as leader of the Palestinian people above all else. Recalls Hussein advisor Adnan Abu Odeh, "Arafat is a survivor,' adding, 'when he was with the king , he was respectful. When he was with the others, he opposed the king. That is Arafat."

By September 1970, Hussein saw that his kingdom disintegrating as a result of the rising Palestinian state within his state, and ordered a crackdown on Palestinians. In a pattern that would repeat itself in the future, Arafat believed he could count on external intervention to rescue him from his miscalculations with regard to the way in which he expected the Jordanian government to respond to Palestinian conduct. A variety of Arab mediation efforts were tried but to no avail. The Jordanian army ended up killing 2,000-3,000 people in its attempts to restore order to the Kingdom. Arafat's position became so tenuous that he had to be smuggled out of the country in a spare robe of a visiting Kuwaiti mediator. The Palestinians were routed, but vowed to overthrow Jordan.

The violence that ensued between the Jordanian army and the Palestinians became enshrined in Palestinian lore as

"Black September," which became the newest shell name for Fatah. Palestinian officials say that Arafat gave his blessing to the attacks made in the name of "Black September." The first targets of the organization were Jordanians, but the violence soon spread to other victims. Arafat's lieutenants Salah Khalaf, known as Abu Iyad, and Ali Hassan Salameh, launched a series of terror attacks which ranged from hijacking a Sabena airliner flying to Israel, to killing 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, to the killing of the US ambassador to Sudan, Cleo Noel. In his memoir, Abu Iyad said such overseas attacks had to supplant the loss of Jordan as a base for attacks against Israel. He defended the attack in Khartoum, by saying that the attack was aimed at an American diplomatic target, killed alongside Noel in response to his alleged role in Jordan during Black September. Israel claims that Arafat was personally in touch with the killers at the time of the assassination, but this has not been confirmed. According to Abu Iyad, "Arafat did have knowledge about Black September but was not aware of the logistics or operational details."

Such prominent and highly publicized acts of terrorism got the Palestinians on the international map. In 1974, Arafat took advantage of this new position to win the support of the Arab world and ensure that the PLO replaced Jordan as "the sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people, displacing his rival, Jordan. As a result, he could represent the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in negotiations with Israel. Two weeks after he got the Arab world to recognize him as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, Arafat made a second diplomatic gain when the United Nations General Assembly invited him to speak for the first time. There he put forth the Palestinian case, and not only avoided talking about peace with Israel, but instead spoke of "the Jewish invasion of Palestine." Amid strong applause, Arafat clasped his hands above his head, and a holster came into view. His Baretta, at least, was kept off the stage.

As Arafat received plaudits at the UN, he once again found himself at odds with an Arab host. Having been expelled from Jordan, he now based himself in Lebanon, the last frontline Arab state that agreed to welcome the Palestinians. The country's president Suleiman Franjeh accused Arafat of exploiting the country's hospitality by sparking confrontation and contributing to a deteriorating civil war. Franjeh charged Arafat with the same thing that Hussein did: skirmishing with the Lebanese forces, engaging in duplicity, and not disciplining more radical Palestinian elements. Once again, Arafat made promises that his new mini-state would confine itself, but did not keep them. Given the preexisting enmity between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon, the Palestinian unrest made the situation in Lebanon even more delicate. Despite the urgings of aides to remain neutral, Arafat, a guest in Lebanon, openly backed the Muslims, further plunging Lebanon into a civil war that broke out in 1975 and lasted 15 years. This earned Arafat the lasting enmity of the Christians, and set the stage for an Israeli-Christian alliance seven years later that led to his ouster at the hands of another nemesis, Ariel Sharon. His alliance provoked intervention from an unlikely place against the Palestinians. Damascus, viewing Arafat's challenge to the balance of power in Lebanon as a threat to its own interests in the region, decided to intervene. As a result, an estimated 5,000 Palestinians were killed. Arafat's call for greater Arab intervention against Syria not only went effectively unanswered, but undermined his cause further. This would not be Arafat's last such miscalculation.

As his political patrons found the Palestinian cause to be increasingly expensive and inconvenient, Arafat entered a period of greater isolation. His traditional main patron had been Egypt, but in November 1977, Anwar Sadat made a historic trip to Jerusalem that culminated in a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Within three days of the trip, Arafat made a joint statement with Syrian leader Hafez Assad, charging Sadat with a "treasonous" action. However, the Arab world was increasingly preoccupied with its own problems, which would shortly include a debilitating, eight year Iran-Iraq War which absorbed the energies of all the key Arab states in the region.

Arafat's most intensive military engagement with Israel, to date, was the 1982 Lebanon War, and the Arabs were preoccupied. Sharon genuinely believed that he could push the PLO away from his border by expelling the group

from Lebanon, dealing a body blow to Palestinian nationalism, and at the same time, reconfiguring Israel's northern neighbor. Arafat correctly anticipated that Sharon was aiming his campaign directly at him, and would not be confined to a proclaimed cross-border action. In response, Arafat publicly vowed that Beirut would be "the Stalingrad of the Arabs." Once again, Arafat thought that the Arabs would intervene on his behalf, but even his Lebanese hosts urged him to leave. Arafat agreed to do so in principle, but gave no commitments on details. Israel began bombing his suspected hideouts in Beirut, but like a cartoon Tom and Jerry that many eyewitnesses say he loved to watch endlessly, Arafat played the role of Jerry and avoided defeat by constantly moving around. Under siege in 1982, he was furious that no Arab states came to his aid. He issued a public appeal aimed at Arab leaders, citing Saladin, the Muslim leader who expelled the Crusaders in the 12th Century. He declared, "I do not need your prayers, but I need your swords." Arafat added, "what then is the explanation for this ... indifference?" By the end of August 1982, Arafat and the PLO set sail from Lebanon first to Athens and later moved to their new home in Tunis, enduring the second exile in 11 years.

Nevertheless, Arafat sought to portray his defeat as a victory and would later boast to diplomats that he was "the only undefeated general in the Middle East" and the one of the greatest in Arab history. But the defeat in Lebanon set the roots for an internal insurrection began against Arafat, as Palestinians charged him with corruption and blamed the defeat on his tendency to appoint his cronies as military commanders. Now Arafat was forced to take on the rebels, in order to ensure his survival was at stake. The internal revolt had a powerful backer- Syria. Just when it looked like Arafat would be crushed, however, the Saudis, fearing an even more radical Palestinian leadership, intervened. Arafat, who had secretly returned to a last northern Lebanon base to rally his troops, would be expelled yet again a year after the Lebanon War debacle, but he would survive. This despite assassination attempts against him, and most famously, he would survive a mysterious downing of his plane in a Libyan desert in 1992. Many on board perished, but Arafat miraculously came out alive, underscoring his signature style as a survivor.

Arafat survived deepening regional isolation and retained his authority by a variety of methods. One Palestinian, alluding to his iconic status said, "Arafat is the stone that we throw at the world." The stubborn survivor ensured that no opposition could grow strong enough to defeat him by avoiding formal hierarchical structures in his organization. He had no fixed deputies, but rather he loved to divide and rule. He also kept tight control of PLO finances. While he lived an austere lifestyle, he distributed largesse to others so they could live a freewheeling style. Israeli military officials would charge at the end of his life that he had over a billion dollars in his name, but he denied this. Arafat would not be married for almost his entire life saying he was "married to the revolution," but in his later years, he married Suha Tawil, daughter of a prominent Palestinian Christian family in the West Bank. She converted to Islam, and they had one daughter named after Arafat's mother Zahwa. Yet, as the Oslo experiment soured, Suha told friends hated Gaza and viewed it as "a prison" and would spend much of her time in Paris.

Despite his isolation, Arafat's resilience was remarkable. In the late 80's, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza gave up on him and took matters in their own hands. They started an uprising against Israel in 1987, yet Arafat quickly realized the gravity of the situation, and sought to lead the parade. However, his success was quickly offset by yet another miscalculation. Arafat embraced Saddam in 1990 during the Gulf crisis after the Iraqi leader promised to liberate Palestine, thus enraging long time financial patrons in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. An estimated 400,000 Palestinians living in the Gulf were suddenly expelled. Arafat found himself marginalized once again. In a landmark Middle East peace conference was held at the end of 1991, he was absent due to Israeli participation. Yet, Arafat's luck changed a few months later. A new government was elected in Israel headed by Yitzhak Rabin and after close to a year in office, he was convinced that a local Palestinian delegation from the West Bank and Gaza was not capable of reaching a peace agreement with Israel on its own. The result was secret talks in Oslo that led to the famous handshake on the White House lawn.

Survival may have dictated that Arafat extricated himself from his isolation by joining Oslo and getting his foot in the door in 1993, but the same sense of survival years later and his experience of the past may have dictated that he not close the deal so as not to be exposed to the wrath of militants. He somehow believed the Arabs or the international community will extricate him from yet another miscalculation, where he could choose defiance over genuine leadership. But Arafat he also had a mystical faith that he was Arab history's messenger and therefore, perpetuation of the Palestinian problem was not his problem since there is providential destiny. History was his ally, and therefore time was on his side. He could gain his demands without paying the price of final compromise. Thus, the quintessential survival would be rewarded, but alas, it was not to be the case. ❖

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