

The Man Who Married a Cause

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As the Middle East negotiator for the United States during the Clinton administration, I met with Yasser Arafat more than any other non-Palestinian -- probably more than 500 meetings in a series of windowless negotiating rooms, in his office overlooking the Mediterranean in Gaza, in the Oval Office with the president and privately at his residence. At literally every meeting he hosted, he would serve lunch or dinner. And I mean serve.

In my first meeting with him, in a nondescript house in a residential neighborhood of Tunis in 1994, he cut up our baked chicken and personally dished out a portion to every member of my team. I joked that he was treating me like my mother did whenever I returned home, and he beamed, accepting this as the ultimate compliment.

But open as he was when it came to welcoming visitors, he was closed and unrevealing in the peace negotiations we conducted between 1994 and 2000. This was both a tactic and a strategy. Tactically, by revealing little, he forced the Israelis or us to move toward his position in an effort to draw him out. Strategically, it was a way to defer choices, to keep his options open, while also keeping his negotiators on a tight leash because they too did not know what he would ultimately decide. Because he kept the ultimate power for himself, I felt it was important to meet with him privately as often as possible. Of course even in our private settings, he could still be maddening to deal with because he lived in a world of his making. He would often make up a fact, repeat it, and then believe it.

One time in 1996, when I was shuttling between Jerusalem and Gaza to try to negotiate Israel's withdrawal from Hebron, an aide broke into our private meeting with a note. It said the Israelis had moved 250 tanks into Gaza, and Arafat seized on it, saying he would never surrender to such tactics. I told him the story was preposterous; 250 tanks could not be moved secretly into Gaza. Everyone would know it, and I, having just arrived in Gaza by helicopter, would have seen a line of tanks stretching for miles. But he would not be dissuaded, pointing repeatedly to the piece of paper as if it proved something.

Realizing I could not convince him, I took the phone next to him and called then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu denied it, yelling at me that this was ridiculous; I asked him to look into it and phone me back. Shortly after, Netanyahu called back to report that Israel had redeployed three armored personnel carriers into Gaza. Not 250, but three.

When I told Arafat this, he dropped the issue that evening. But, after failing to do the deal that night, I returned home

to Washington for a few weeks, and at the first meeting on my return, Arafat started off the meeting with his list of grievances. First on his list: The Israelis had moved 250 tanks into Gaza.

Arafat was street smart, sometimes cagey, with an instinctive feel for strategy, and these mythologies -- whether or not he believed them -- were not simply irrational. They always served a purpose. Sometimes they were a way to put the onus on the Israelis and shift attention from his own responsibilities. Or, on other occasions, they were a way to deny the legitimacy of Israeli claims.

Arafat would do and say anything for the cause of Palestine. In truth, he saw himself as the embodiment of the cause. For a long time, he said he could never marry because he was married to the cause. At one point, when I told him I was going to leave the area to take a vacation, he said it must be nice to take a vacation. I said, "Mr. Chairman, you could use one," and he replied his last vacation had been in 1963 during one afternoon. "Well," I said, "that proves you could really use one." Even then, with no one else in the room with us, with no one else to impress or perform for, he told me he simply could not take a vacation from the cause.

Tragically, for Arafat and his people, he could not live without the cause and the claims it embodied. The cause defined him. Ending the conflict with Israel would have meant ending the cause. And he couldn't bring himself to do it.

That's why he turned down the historic proposals offered him shortly before President Clinton left office. He may have been the man who put the Palestinian cause on the map, but he couldn't, in the end, translate it from an abstraction into a reality. He couldn't close the deal.

Statehood, Arafat finally said, was not sufficient if it did not address all Palestinian claims, including the unlimited right of return to Israel for Palestinian refugees -- something that reasonable negotiators understood was never going to happen.

Perhaps his successors, not having to be the living, breathing embodiment of the cause, will be more capable of fulfilling its goals and achieving a Palestinian state that is capable of coexisting with Israel.

The writer, a former US envoy to the Middle East, is author of *The Missing Peace* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2004) and counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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