

In Bad Company: Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein

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Articles & Testimony

When I taught history in an Iraqi university last year, I had several students from single-parent homes. The problem was not divorce, but rather politics. Some of my student's parents had supported opposition political figures, so Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had them shot. Some professors were widowed for the same reasons.

Iraq was never a democracy but, until 34 years ago, it did tolerate dissent. There were monarchists, communists, nationalists, liberals, and conservatives. This changed in July 1968, when the Baath Party seized control. Saddam Hussein, then just a midlevel functionary, took charge of purging the government of disloyal elements and collaborators. He did his job with a remarkable efficiency that continues to this day. Any politician that disagrees with Saddam is thrown in prison, tortured, or killed. Many in Saddam Hussein's party justify the purge of dissent. After all, they explain, Saddam is so popular (he wins nearly 100 percent of every vote) that only those who collaborate with enemies like Iran, Israel, or the United States could oppose the president.

Saddam does have friends, though, foremost among whom is Yasser Arafat. Arafat backed Saddam both when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, and Kuwait ten years later. Arafat regularly receives weapons and money from Iraq. In March, Arafat's foreign minister Faruq Qaddumi even appeared on Iraqi Television to thank Saddam Hussein for his generous support. Saddam now pays \$25,000 to the family of every suicide bomber.

One of these suicide bombers, a 22-year-old, detonated himself down the street from my apartment, killing eleven in the neighborhood cafe. It seems incredible that less than two years ago, Israel and the Palestinians were on the verge of peace. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered Arafat an independent state in 98 percent of the West Bank and Gaza, part of Jerusalem, and the dismantling of settlements. Arafat stunned even his own negotiators by walking away. The uprising started, marked by both terror and reprisal.

Western diplomats, and a gaggle of journalists and correspondents now offer high-sounding condemnations of the cycle of violence. U.N. officials, for their part, blame occupation for the increasing polarity, conveniently ignoring their own contribution by funding grossly anti-Semitic schoolbooks for Palestinian schools. (The Palestinian Authority's Grade-12 textbook, for example, teaches that Jews welcome persecution "for the purpose of gaining material and moral profit").

Terror and incitement do not alone explain the polarity, nor do simplistic statements of moral equivalence explain why the radicalization is so one-sided. There is no doubt that Israelis are now more hawkish than before the uprising, but Israel's doves nevertheless are a vocal presence. Correspondents jostle to interview Yossi Beilin, an architect of the Oslo Accords, and Meretz party leader Yossi Sarid, both of whom cuttingly criticize Prime Minister Sharon.

Journalists seemingly cannot find the same dissension among the Palestinians, implying that every Palestinian agrees with Arafat, Hamas, or Islamic Jihad. Palestinians who believe in peaceful coexistence do exist, though.

However, if the last few weeks are any indication, they may not for much longer.

In the past month, the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade and Tanzim, military units formally attached to Arafat's own Fatah movement, have executed scores of "collaborators." Collaboration is so hideous, Palestinian spokesmen say, that such violence is understandable. On April 23, Palestinian gunmen seized Zuhayr al-Muhtassib and two other Palestinians, shot them, and then dragged Muhtassib through the streets, finally hanging him from a pylon. Muhtassib's execution became a side note to the Israel's assassination earlier that day of Marwan Zaloun, chief of the local al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade branch. Numerous articles implied that Zaloun's assassination justified the murder of the three "collaborators." Only one problem, though: The three victims had been locked in a Palestinian jail for over a year; they could not be responsible for Zaloun's death. Their crime was not informing on Zaloun, but rather opposition to Arafat. Muhtassib and his two cellmates were not alone.

During the first intifada, the PLO purged more than 800 Palestinians. In the past month, gangs linked to Arafat have machine-gunned collaborators in Gaza, Ramallah, Nablus, Qalqilya, and even Manger Square in Bethlehem. Tanzim executed Bassam Eid, a 22-year-old in Ramallah, after his sister reported seeing him talking to an Israeli. After all, dialogue is forbidden. Executions are public, and meant to terrorize. Bodies are displayed to send a warning.

Arafat today is like Saddam in 1968; and as in Iraq, dissent is disappearing. But before journalists label victims of summary executions collaborators, they must ask why no trial, and what exactly Arafat's henchmen mean by the term. They may find that, to the Palestinian Authority, a collaborator is anyone who speaks of coexistence with Israel or questions into whose bank accounts hundreds of millions of dollars of aid money disappeared. But with little outrage over the killings of so-called collaborators, it should be no surprise the Palestinian peace camp has all but disappeared. ❖

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