

Arafat Was the Excuse, Not the Reason, for the Failure of the Peace Process

By Stephen Zunes | November 11, 2004

While there are many negative things one can say about the late Yasser Arafat, he was not the primary reason for the breakdown in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At most, he was the excuse.

This is not to say that Arafat did not make quite a number of stupid and unethical choices in his lengthy career which set back hopes for peace and badly hurt the Palestinian cause.

In recent years, however, the late Palestinian leader's negotiating position regarding the outstanding issues of the peace process—such as the extent of the Israeli withdrawal, the status of Jerusalem, and the fate of the settlements—was actually more moderate, more consistent with international law, and more in line with UN Security Council resolutions, the positions of America's leading allies, and the policies of previous U.S. administrations than the current Israeli or American positions.

When Arafat took control of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) thirty-six years ago, he called for the establishment of a democratic secular state in all of Palestine, which would have meant the end of Israel as a Jewish state. (Contrary to popular belief, Arafat never promised to “drive the Jews into the sea.” That quote was from his predecessor Ahmed Shukeiry, whom Arafat and his followers ousted from the PLO leadership in 1968.) Since 1988, Arafat has been on record supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside Israel, which would constitute about 22% of Palestine.

While in exile, Arafat was responsible for a number of terrorist attacks by his Fatah movement. Most of the more notorious incidents during this era, however—such as the airline hijackings—were done by Marxist groups which, while under the PLO umbrella, were not under Arafat's control. There is also little evidence directly linking Arafat to any terrorist attacks for at least two decades. The suicide bombings of recent years have come primarily from Islamist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad; the

al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, while nominally affiliated with Fatah, appears to have acted independently of Arafat's control.

Since Israel reconquered large areas of Palestinian land in early 2002, laid siege to the rest, and confined Arafat to his compound in Ramallah, he no longer had much control of anything. When I last saw him during my visit there in April, he came across as a rather sad and isolated figure.

In any case, it would be hard to argue that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—the recipient of more U.S. foreign aid than any other leader in the world—has any less blood on his hands, both historically and in recent years, than does Arafat.

Camp David Redux

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's peace proposal at Camp David in 2000 was not nearly as generous as first reported and it is unlikely that any Palestinian leader could have accepted it. However, negotiations continued and came very close to an agreement during talks in Taba, Egypt in January 2001. Unfortunately, with the election of the right-wing Sharon as prime minister, Israel has refused to resume the talks.

Late last year, a group of Fatah leaders and other prominent Palestinians met with leading Israeli moderates to draft a peace proposal based upon the Taba negotiations three years earlier. Arafat spoke positively of the efforts, signed last December in Geneva, which were roundly condemned by Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon.

In response, Sharon proposed a disengagement plan that, while removing most of the illegal settlements from the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip, would annex nearly half of the West Bank and subdivide the

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remaining Palestinian areas into a series of small noncontiguous cantons surrounded by Israel. The Bush administration and an overwhelming bipartisan majority of Congress have endorsed Sharon's initiative, which the rightist prime minister's principal adviser Dov Weisglass has admitted was designed to undermine the peace process and deny the Palestinians a viable state.

The Bush administration insisted that, as a condition for receiving U.S. support for an end of the Israeli occupation, the corrupt and autocratic Palestine Authority under Arafat had to clean up its act and become more democratic. However, the United States did not insist that the corrupt and autocratic government of Kuwait allow for more transparency and democracy as a condition for supporting its freedom from Iraqi occupation.

For while Israel has created exemplary democratic institutions for its Jewish citizens, is a strong American ally, and serves a vital role as the only national homeland of a historically oppressed people, the fact remains that Israel is an occupying power and therefore has the onus of responsibility in ending the conflict.

Although Arafat was certainly not a good representative of the Palestinian people, it is unlikely that his passing will improve the prospects for peace as long as Israel insists on maintaining its occupation and the

United States continues to provide the Sharon government with unconditional military, economic, and diplomatic support.

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