

Palestine Greater Than Arafat

By Sam Bahour | November 11, 2004

The Palestinian struggle for freedom and independence is larger than the late President Yasser Arafat. The decades-long symbolism that Arafat embodied should not be underestimated. It is this symbolism that Palestinians are mourning. The substance of Arafat's symbolism has to do with how it has represented Palestinian nationalism and the five decade struggle for justice for a people that were dispossessed in 1948, militarily occupied in 1967, attacked while in exile in 1970 in Jordan and 1982 in Lebanon, and most recently, battered in their own homes in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. A wide spectrum of opinions about Arafat, the man and the leader, will surely outlive the international flurry of media interest in his death. However, the world must be aware that the Palestinian struggle is beyond any single individual.

During the last decade, Yasser Arafat brought to the table something that Israel and the United States could only previously dream about: the single legitimate source for Palestinian political decisions. Through his iron-fisted and highly centralized control of Palestinian decision making bodies, finances and fighters, Arafat was able to coax his people into dealing with a new reality, the Oslo Peace Process, that he hoped would open the door for good faith from Israel and the United States. Arafat hoped that this process would ultimately end in a political solution resulting in two independent states living side by side, Palestine and Israel. History has proven that Israel and the United States had other plans—the creation of a process that would, in and of itself, become the means as well as the goal. It was a process that would serve as the final nail in the coffin of the legitimate Palestinian demands that international and humanitarian law be applied to their case.

Israel and the United States made a major blunder. They ignored the fact that the “peace” they had made was a peace between leaders and not between peoples. Thus, as the U.S. and Israel unsuccessfully sought to twist Arafat's arm in the Camp David II talks in Year 2000, they began a concerted campaign discrediting Arafat and pinning the blame of the breakdown of talks on a single person. Arafat was truly the shrewder politician. He knew that for a peace among leaders to be transformed into a peace among peoples, the real issues of the conflict had to be justly addressed. Refugees, settlements, Jerusalem, and statehood were not negotiating cards, but the essence of the entire effort.

It is amazing how someone so “irrelevant,” such as Arafat was deemed by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, can attract so much attention even in his death. The international media that has flooded the city of Ramallah, Arafat's last place of refuge, is poised to analyze every minute aspect of his death and burial. What they will most likely miss is the most important part of his legend, which lies in the fact that the struggle for Palestinian freedom and independence, which Arafat symbolized, will not be buried with him.

Once the tears are wiped away the situation can take many shapes, the most likely being that the Palestinian leadership will be able to establish governing legitimacy. Earning leadership legitimacy, however, will take some time. Among the complications are that there are several Palestinian political bodies that must be addressed, since Arafat led all of them single-handedly.

The PLO's Future

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) will be the most difficult to address since it is a body that represents all Palestinians worldwide and is the formal signatory to the Oslo Peace Accords, from which the Palestinian Authority was established. The PLO has not held elections for decades and the basic issue of who is an eligible member of this body, as well as where their meetings should be held, will be internally questioned in the days to come. Additionally, unlike the Palestinian Authority, which is a rather new body and has been under tremendous international scrutiny, the PLO's inner workings and finances are a black box to many Palestinians, leaders as well as masses.

The Palestinian Authority (PA), being a product of the Oslo Peace Process, is solely focused on governing the Palestinians living under occupation. It is expected that this body, especially given a recently enacted Basic Law, will make a stable succession and continue to perform its duties. It is also expected that the international community will be extremely interested in continuing to politically and financially support the PA in order to avoid a social upheaval in the Occupied Territories that would certainly turn toward the Israeli occupiers as well. The Palestinian Authority is where it will be most likely that the first free and democratic elections would take place in the post-Arafat era. However, unlike Arafat, who had a multitude of vantage points, the expected outcome of PA elections would result in a vision produced by a people that, for many, know no other life except that of living under Israeli military occupation and the death and destruction that the Oslo process has brought them. Politically,

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this will create a more hard-line position toward Israel, albeit mixed with sober practicality.

The third body that the Palestinian leadership will need to address post-Arafat is Arafat's own political party, FATAH. This will be a long drawn-out saga since no one party member is privy to the decision-making process, finances and grassroots support. The one FATAH member that has the ability to rally the party is Palestinian Legislative Council member and FATAH Secretary Marwan Barghouti, who Israel has imprisoned along with 7,000 other Palestinians.

In light of the complex and sensitive situation that Arafat's death has created, it would be naïve for the world, or the new Palestinian leadership for that matter, to think that a quick political settlement could be achieved without addressing the core issues, once and for all. To continue to force-feed Palestinians with half-cooked initiatives, such as the Unilateral Disengagement Plan, the Roadmap, the Tenant Plan, the Mitchell Plan, the Oslo Accords and such would be yet another wasted opportunity for the world community to resolve this conflict. And with every wasted effort more innocent people will die on both sides of the illegal Separation Wall that Israel is building on Palestinian lands and which has turned Palestinian cities into open-air concentration camps.

The International Community's Role

Time will be needed as Palestinians prepare for long overdue elections, the restructuring of their organizations, and the bringing to trial of those who have stolen or misused Palestinian public funds in the past. An Israel led by Ariel Sharon will surely do all in her power to make sure that the Palestinians fail in picking up the pieces after Arafat's demise. Thus, it is the responsibility of the international community to finally step in and play its neglected role of protecting

the militarily occupied Palestinians and demanding that Israel immediately abide by all Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, which call for the real end of military occupation and not a redeployment ploy such as that being offered for Gaza in Israel's Disengagement Plan.

The United Nations should immediately convene to deploy multinational troops to provide protection to the Palestinian people, as stipulated for by the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. Such an international presence would serve many purposes. On the one hand, it would protect the Palestinians from the continuing onslaught by the Israeli military and give them time to recover from five decades of autocratic rule. On the other hand, a multinational peace-keeping force would save Israel from itself, since its continuous pushing of an occupied people to total despair can only breed more violence.

Despite the confusion of the hour, one fact remains clear. The Palestinian people, collectively, whether in the Occupied Territories, scattered in squalid refugee camps around the Middle East, or living in exile, will never wake up one day and accept the historic injustice that has been done to them. As long as Palestinians breathe they will rightfully demand that law and justice prevail in ending the nightmare that has haunted them for more than 50 years. It is in this spirit that one may recall the words of former United States President John F. Kennedy when he said, "Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable."

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