

ISRAEL NEWS FROM DAVID DOLAN

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END OF ARAFAT ERA

Waves of uncertainty, violence and unrest continued to sweep over several parts of the turbulent Middle East during November, leaving an ever murkier future in their wake. The most dramatic wave was formed by the death of the infamous “Palestine Liberation Organization” Chairman, Muhammad Abdel Raouf Arafat As Qudwaai Husseini—better known as Yasser Arafat. As with most regional Arab autocrats who lack an adult son, the Palestinian leader deliberately did not groom any clear successor, leaving a political void as his immediate legacy. Meanwhile Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon struggled to stay in power after another small party quit his government coalition due to his controversial unilateral withdrawal plan.

While most Palestinians grieved over the loss of their trademark keffiyah-clad icon, at least to some degree, Arafat will hardly be missed by Israeli Jews. A majority were willing to overlook, if not forget, his long history of vile terrorist activity and accept him as a genuine “peace partner” after his 1993 White House promise to put an end to all violent Palestinian attacks. But as it became ever more evident that their tentative trust was entirely misplaced, Israelis felt increasingly betrayed by the notorious terrorist chief.

From the inception of the Oslo “land for peace” process, not a few Israelis were more than skeptical over assurances by then-American President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres that the murderous leopard had actually changed his blood-soaked spots. After all, Arafat had been the main instigator of a hellish string of deadly atrocities that stretched from the time he first organized armed raids into Israel from Jordan in 1964 until he declared in 1990 that he would “ride a white horse into liberated Al Quds” (Jerusalem) with his Scud-shooting buddy, Saddam Hussein.

In between, Arafat ordered the kidnapping and murder of Israeli athletes in Munich, the slaughter of children in a seized school in northern Israel, the hijacking of airplanes and buses, the bombings of shops and restaurants, ad nauseam. All the while, he promised his followers that he would “liberate Palestine” from detested Jewish control after either driving the “devilish Jews” into the Mediterranean Sea (1964-1988) or forcing them to drink the poisonous waters of the Dead Sea (1989-2004). And then there were his more recent calls for “a million Palestinians martyrs” to prepare themselves to “liberate Al Quds.”

In the end, Yasser Arafat did not realize his demonic dream to destroy the re-born Jewish state. Instead, he died a pitiful old man in a Paris hospital. Standing next to his deathbed was his much younger, mostly estranged wife who was busy ranting about a supposed conspiracy by his closest PLO comrades to murder him and seize control of his vast financial (and tiny territorial) empire. Meanwhile Israel continues to grow in population, economic power and military might—despite the bloody terrorist attrition war launched by the venerated Palestinian leader and his subordinates over four years ago.

POISONOUS DARTS

While relieved to see Arafat depart this world for good, Israeli officials were hardly sanguine that his passing would lead to a brighter day for the troubled Middle East. True, PM Sharon and various cabinet ministers did publicly express some degree of hope that his death might open up new peace opportunities for the region. But they were privately said to agree with Israeli security analysts that the immediate future is likely to be no less rocky than before Arafat’s final exit.

The negative assessment is based on several factors. One is the widespread acceptance on the Palestinian street of allegations that Arafat was poisoned by Israeli agents. This will fuel anti-Israel violence for many months to come, said the analysts. Among others, the charge was made by Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, who was himself poisoned by Israeli Mossad agents in Jordan in 1997. The late King Hussein forced the Netanyahu government to send an antidote to save the militant Muslim's life. Mashaal pointed to several alleged "similarities" between his poisoning and Arafat's dying condition. Given his personal experience, the claim was eagerly accepted by most Hamas supporters and by many other Arabs, even though several Palestinian Authority officials denied the charge, as did Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom who termed it "ridiculous."

The poison theory was fertilized by the fact that Suha Arafat refused to allow French doctors to release any information on her husband's final health crisis. This not only added to speculation that he had been murdered by the Sharon government—which was supposedly operating via various alleged Palestinian "co-conspirators" like former PM Mahmoud Abbas and current PM Ahmed Qurei—but also to widely whispered suggestions that Arafat had perished from AIDS. Adding weight to the latter rumor, the auto-immune viral disease was fingered as the fatal culprit by an American homosexual website, and subsequently reported in the Israeli media. Various Middle East spy agencies have long been said to possess photographic and other evidence of Arafat's reputed homosexual activity, spanning many decades from the time he was a college student leader in Cairo in the late 1940s.

MANY IN LINE

The second major reason that Israeli analysts expect Palestinian turmoil to escalate is the lack of a popular leader to replace Yasser Arafat. This was somberly illustrated when his non-commanding deputies could not even gain control of surging crowds at Arafat's chaotic November 12th funeral in Ramallah.

Although various PLO bodies were convened to elect new leaders as Arafat lay dying, the results were hardly encouraging to anyone looking for long-term stability. Adding to the quicksand mix, the vaulted "father of the nation" had held several titles simultaneously, meaning his successors in any one of those positions will automatically be less influential than their departed mentor.

The most powerful position that Arafat occupied was not "Palestinian Authority (PA) President" as many might expect, but his longtime role as PLO Chairman. Despite the fact that the Palestinian people elected parliament members in 1996, the supposed legislators discovered right away that their votes and opinions held little, if any water. Instead, it was and remains the PLO Executive Committee that calls the main shots, along with the Fatah (Victory) political movement founded by Arafat and others in 1958.

In a fitting tribute to the PLO's preeminent role, the new acting PA "president" is the barely known Legislative Council Speaker, Rouhi Fatouh. The colorless politician—who had only presided over the token body for eight months when appointed interim PA president—is not expected to wield any real governing authority in the coming weeks or months. Instead, the new PLO Chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, holds the main cards in his hands. However, some of Arafat's other power posts are currently controlled by PM Ahmed Qurei, along with the new Fatah leader, Farouk Kaddoumi.

The unexpected early November election of Kaddoumi as Fatah's number one could throw another huge spanner into the post-Arafat era. A formerly close confidant of the deceased PLO strongman, he fell from grace after adamantly refusing to support the Oslo peace accords. Analysts said Kaddoumi's triumph was an accurate reflection of current widespread opposition in the dominant movement to the frozen peace process, and thus

also a precursor of deep trouble ahead for any new PA leader who might try to pursue the internationally-backed “two-state solution” with Israel.

BALLOTS OR BULLETS?

Even before their boss was officially, if not belatedly, declared dead, Palestinian Authority spokesmen pledged to hold an election for a new PA president within two months of Arafat’s passing. The date was later set for 9 January—just three weeks before Iraqis are supposed to elect a new president for their blood-soaked country. The irony that elected replacements for the terror-promoting Palestinian and Iraqi dictators are supposed to emerge in same month was not lost on Israeli pundits.

However, many officials and analysts strongly doubt that the announced Palestinian election will actually be held on schedule; as many also do the planned succession contest for the beastly Saddam Hussein. They note that the twin Arab despots, who shared many traits in common (including deployment of the fear factor as their main tool of governance), left their subjects deeply divided and destitute in their enormously corrupt and autocratic wakes. Already, various Palestinian leaders are laying the blame for any election failure at Israel’s feet, saying the presence of IDF forces encircling most Arab towns might forestall a “fair” vote from taking place.

Mahmoud Abbas, better known to Palestinians as Abu Mazen, is expected to be elected overall PA leader if the vote is actually held. Before that, he must survive potential assassination attempts, given that many see him as an American/Israeli lackey who conspired to poison their Great Leader. Mazen’s 2003 call for an end to the Arafat-backed Palestinian attrition war led to his forced retirement from the newly created post of PA prime minister. The controversial call, plus his continuing advocacy of some sort of final peace settlement with Israel, does not exactly endear him to the multiple armed terror groups now roaming Palestinian streets.

As Arafat fell deeper into a coma, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and even armed Fatah activists were already aiming verbal threats at the new, uncharismatic PLO Chairman. This was followed by a literal firefight between rifle-toting Fatah militants and Mazen’s bodyguards at a mourning tent in Gaza City, which left two PA security men dead and their startled charge running for cover. The November 14th exchange of bullets came just minutes after the armed activists marched into the tent while chanting that the newly crowned PLO chief was a “traitor” to Arafat’s sacred cause.

THE (POSSIBLE) NEW PRESIDENT

Even though he is widely expected to emerge as the next Palestinian Authority leader, Mahmoud Abbas is regarded as far too “moderate” by many Palestinian voters. This is despite the fact that he is the one who convinced Arafat to reject the Clinton-brokered final peace settlement at Camp David in July 2000, arguing that it would not pass muster with most Palestinians. As Arafat’s first, short-lived prime minister in 2003, he also rebuffed US and EU pressure to disarm and dismantle illegal Palestinian terror groups, as called for in the Road Map peace plan.

Still, no one else of significant stature is even in the running for the PA leadership post, meaning that Abbas-Mazen is considered a likely shoe-in (if the vote is actually held). Most opposition groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, have already announced that they will boycott the election since the PA is an “illegitimate” outgrowth of the despised Oslo peace process, which was secretly negotiated in Norway by Abbas on behalf of Arafat.

Mahmoud Abbas was born in the Galilee town of Safed in 1935. He fled with his family to Syria after five Arab countries joined local Palestinian leaders in declaring holy war against

the emerging Jewish State in 1948. He studied law in Damascus, and later received his PhD in history from the Oriental College in Moscow. His university thesis “documented” the supposed connivance between Jewish Zionist and German Nazi leaders before and during World War II—a trendy theme in those days in the Soviet capital. Abbas was a founding member of Arafat’s Fatah movement, and has served as a PLO Executive Committee member since 1968.

Opinion polls show that jailed Tanzim terrorist leader Marwan Barghouti might triumph if he stands for PA president, as many of his supporters are urging him to do. This is despite the fact that Barghouti is serving five life sentences for ordering attacks which left four Israelis and a Greek Orthodox priest dead in recent years. If he stands as a candidate, intense international and Arab world pressure would undoubtedly be placed upon Israel to free the populist prisoner. Ariel Sharon has already made clear that he will never unlock the jailed Palestinian’s cell door, even though it is quite obvious that Barghouti is responsible for the deaths of far less people than the deceased “Nobel peace prize laureate” was.

George W. Bush and Tony Blair were among many world leaders expressing hope that if Abbas is indeed elected PA president, the stalled Road Map peace plan may quickly move forward again. In fact, Arafat’s body was barley cold when Ahmed Qurei demanded that a Palestinian state be established by late 2005, as called for in the original plan. However Israeli leaders decried the demand, noting the PA has not even weakly attempted to fulfill their main Road Map requirement to disarm and dismantle all terror groups and halt attacks against Israel.

ALL FALL DOWN

Yasser Arafat’s drawn out death gave Ariel Sharon some breathing space during November, as attention temporarily shifted away from his divisive unilateral Gaza withdrawal plan. However, his coalition became even weaker when the National Religious Party formally pulled out to protest the plan, leaving the PM with only 55 votes in the Knesset. With 65 politicians now officially in the opposition, Sharon’s government could collapse at any time, forcing early elections. Still, many opposition members pledged to support Sharon over all disengagement issues, giving him a safety net in those areas. But many analysts said it was only a matter of time before he would lose a no-confidence vote over other matters. If the government falls, Sharon can anticipate a strong challenge for party leader from Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who remains lukewarm at best over the pullout plan.

While political intrigues continued in November, Israeli officials kept one eye on the fighting in Fallujah, looking to see where Iraq might be heading in the coming months. They also pointed again to the dangers lurking further east on the horizon, where the extremist Iranian regime is believed to be nearing the point of nuclear no return. Alarm bells rang when Iran’s proxy Hizbullah force sent an Iranian-built drone aircraft into Israeli airspace early in the month, while warning that future flights could carry bombs into the heart of northern Israeli cities. Officials in Jerusalem responded to the air intrusion by once again stating the obvious: The burgeoning militia force that operates with impunity along the country’s northern border will have to be fiercely dealt with one of these days, even if that sparks an armed response from Syria and/or Iran.

Quoting unnamed senior military intelligence officers, Israeli newspapers report that Iran is operating a clandestine nuclear weapons program that is totally separate from the uranium enrichment process it agreed to temporarily suspend in mid-November. If not stopped, the IDF officers warn that the radical Islamic state could produce nuclear bombs within two years. The disturbing media reports followed a startling statement from outgoing American Secretary of State Colin Powell that Iran is already working to fit such warheads on its recently tested long-range missiles.

News of the growing existential threat from Iran served as a piercing reminder to war-weary Israelis that the struggle to survive in the mostly Muslim Middle East is hardly over with Yasser Arafat's passing. Still, the Bible foretells that all of Israel's enemies will eventually face divine retribution from The Everlasting Father: *"Rejoice Oh nations with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance on His adversaries, and will atone for His land and His people."* (Deuteronomy 33:43).

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- [HOLY WAR FOR THE PROMISED LAND](#) (Broadman & Holman), his latest book, is an overview of the history of the Israel and of the bitter Arab-Israeli conflict that rages there, plus some autobiographical details about the author's experiences living in the land since 1980. It especially examines the important role that militant Islam plays in the conflict.
- [ISRAEL IN CRISIS: WHAT LIES AHEAD?](#) (Baker/Revell), which examines the political and biblical prospects for a regional attack upon Israel, settlement in the disputed territories, and related topics, is also available for purchase, along with an updated edition of his popular end-time novel, [THE END OF DAYS](#) (21st Century Press).

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