

**Reflections on the Death of Yasser Arafat**  
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Yasser Arafat is a historic figure and a tragic figure. He is a historic figure because at a time when the Palestinian people had lost their land, their identity, their leadership, and were ignored or considered an irritant by the world community, he told them that they *did* exist, that they were not just refugees but a national people, that they would survive and they would return from exile to their homeland. He gave them hope at a time when they had little reason to hope. In his body and in his indomitable spirit, he symbolized the determination of the Palestinian people to survive. For this reason, he is rightly considered the father of his people. His death produced sincere mourning and grief.

Arafat is a tragic figure because the very qualities that enabled him to keep a divided people together—the ability to equivocate, to imply all things to all people, to maneuver without taking a position that burned bridges—made him a terrible negotiator. To be sure he had difficult partners in Netanyahu and Barak, but no one can deny his own role in the failure of the negotiation process. Like Moses, who stood on the mountain and looked into the Promised Land but was never able to cross over, Arafat sat a few miles from Jerusalem but never worshipped in the mosque there.

Arafat was lionized by Palestinians because during negotiations he refused to buckle under intense Israeli and American pressure. He insisted that the 1967 boundary be the basis of negotiations, that Israeli annexations be replaced with compensatory transfers, that East Jerusalem be the sovereign capital of Palestine, that the Islamic holy sites be under Palestinian sovereignty, and that the refugees have the right to return to their state without Israeli restrictions. All of these principles were ultimately accepted by the Israelis at the Taba talks in January, 2001, just on the eve of Ariel Sharon's election. He also prepared the Palestinian people for the fact that Israel was a permanent entity and that they would have to settle for a Palestinian state, not all of Palestine. In the face of great pressure, he never deviated from this position. Palestinian negotiators accepted changes in the 1967 boundary, accepted that most Jewish settlements would remain, and accepted the partition of East Jerusalem. All of these were major and painful concessions on the Palestinian side. They set the stage for the parameters of an ultimate Israeli-Palestinian negotiated settlement, if one is possible at this point. .

Arafat's leadership of the Palestinian Authority was controversial, to say the least. His ambiguous and equivocal positions in the current Intifada--whether or not he was encouraging suicide bombings--were particularly criticized. As that conflict spiraled out of control and produced over 4,000 fatalities (three-quarters of them Palestinian, most being civilian on both sides), many within the Palestinian leadership criticized him. His international reputation was seriously scarred, Israeli public opinion was hardened, and the Israeli peace camp was marginalized and discredited. In terms of governance, Arafat was a terrible administrator whose regime was corrupt. Large amounts of money disappeared on his watch. Part of the missing money might have been presidential

discretionary funds, but a fortune was diverted to his wife and his cronies. This compromised the ability of the Palestinian Authority to function and did severe harm to the Palestinian people, who are suffering greatly. Arafat was also autocratic and authoritarian. He did not see the democratic impulses in Palestinian society as an asset but worked to undermine them. The Palestinians—both the elite and the public--were frustrated and bitter. Some openly resisted him. We should not forget that the first 'intifada' (uprising) was in the 1980s in Lebanon against Arafat's leadership.

There will be a transitional collective leadership following Arafat. All of the potential leaders are strongly committed to a negotiated settlement based upon the parameters contained in the Clinton proposal (December, 2000) and the Taba Talks (January, 2001). Two of these personalities are military leaders (Rajoub and Dahlan) and two are political leaders without a popular base (Mahmud Abbas/Abu Mazen and Ahmed Qureia/Abu Ala). The one person on that leadership list who has integrity, courage, a commitment to negotiations, resistance credibility, and a popular base is Marwan Barghouti. He is in an Israeli prison serving five life sentences for directing the Tanzim, the Palestinian militia. Barghouti could unite the Palestinians and could sign an agreement. Whoever emerges as the leader will be a solid and determined negotiating partner.

Now that Arafat is gone, there is an opportunity to reopen negotiations. Mr. Sharon and President Bush have said there was no Palestinian partner. Sharon demonized Arafat beyond his human limitations. It is not clear if this stated concern about Arafat was the true reason for not continuing talks since January, 2001 or if it was just an excuse. Sharon has long been a passionate opponent of any negotiated settlement, but the past four years of bloodshed, and the potential for more in the future, may well have forced a reassessment. If Sharon and Bush want a settlement, there is an opportunity. Majorities of the Israeli and Palestinian publics would support them (although some would resist).

The Palestinian authorities have been negotiating with Hamas and other militant groups to ensure a peaceful transition and to avoid intra-Palestinian conflicts. They are also trying to bring Fatah dissident Farouk Kaddoumi on board. If these should join a coalition government (or even acquiesce), this would be a major breakthrough that would stabilize the situation and create a strong Palestinian negotiating front.

There will be great pressure from world leaders for President Bush to appoint a high-profile negotiator to re-open talks. The President would be expected to put his own reputation on the line for these talks. Bush is very resistant to this. His instincts are closer to Sharon than to the Palestinians and he is also hesitant to get involved, having seen how President Clinton was burned by his efforts. However, this conflict is the single most dangerous situation in the world today. It is a swamp of despond that is empowering the most violent and intemperate impulses among both Jews and Palestinians, not to mention the larger Islamic world (and perhaps even within our own country). It is a breeding ground for violent extremists on all sides. The American security interest, not to mention the interests of the wider world, may compel the Americans to lead a new effort for a settlement. If we try to do this on our own, bypassing our allies and the world community, it will fail.