

# Death of Yassir Arafat

Yassir Arafat, elected President of the Palestinians, died in Paris on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2004 at the age of 75. We are here to mourn his passing for three reasons.

1. We mourn him as a human being, with all the imperfections of a human being, who struggled in his own particular way for what he believed to be right and who died without achieving his goal.
2. We mourn him as a representative of the Palestinians and as a symbol of their struggle to achieve emancipation and equality within their own country and more generally in the international community.
3. We mourn him in order to contradict a maliciously disseminated belief that he *was* the problem and that his decease therefore makes peace more likely. There may be a new opportunity for peace, but this arises not from Yassir Arafat's decease.

Yassir Arafat was born in Cairo of Palestinian parents as Mohammad Abdel-Raouf Arafat Lal-Qudwa al-Hussaini on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1929. His education was interrupted by the Palestinian Naqba, or disaster, of 1947-49, when he fought with irregular forces around Gaza. At the end of that war more than three quarters of Palestine lay in the hands of the new Israeli state, and around 700,000 Palestinians had fled or been forced out of that area. In 1959, while working as an engineer in Kuwait, he and others founded the Fatah guerrilla movement whose aim was the liberation of Palestine. In 1964 the PLO was established under the Arab League, and in 1969, with Fatah the leading faction within the PLO, Arafat became its Chairman with his base in Jordan.

The aim of the PLO was then the establishment of a secular democratic state in the whole of Palestine in which Jews, Christians and Muslims would live in harmony and equality. A programme of military resistance was initiated resulting in attacks, such as that on the Israeli Olympic team at Munich, which raised the profile of Palestinian suffering. But diplomacy was the chosen means of achieving Palestinian aspirations, as Arafat made clear in 1974 in his famous speech at the UN: 'I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.'

The PLO was not only opposed by Israel, but was regarded with suspicion by other Arab governments who purported to represent the Palestinian cause but did little diplomatically to help it. After its

expulsion from Jordan by King Hussain, the PLO moved to the Lebanon, from which it was further expelled by the Israelis in 1982. From faraway Tunis Arafat observed powerlessly the unfolding of events in his home country. However, in 1987 the first *intifada*, a spontaneous uprising against the Israeli military occupation, broke out, and the following year, on the basis of this expression of popular will, Arafat effectively proclaimed an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital.

At the same time, contrary to Israeli mythology, Arafat acknowledged the existence of Israel, thus turning the PLO definitively from the aim of a one-state solution to that of a two-state solution – Israel within the armistice borders of 1949 and Palestine within the remaining 22% of Palestine. The secretly negotiated 1993 Oslo accords built on this historic compromise by Arafat. He saw them, as did many Palestinians, as the route to the realisation of a Palestinian state, but he, and they, had not reckoned on the determination of many Israelis, backed at the highest level both in Israel and in the US, to retain control of the occupied territories and in particular of Jerusalem. At no time did Israeli governments agree that the end result of the negotiations would be a Palestinian state. Instead, following the agreed withdrawals of Israeli forces from the Palestinian towns a system of road-blocks was introduced between towns which seriously worsened the condition of the Palestinians. Meanwhile illegal settlement building was greatly accelerated.

Meanwhile Arafat was blamed for a wave of suicide attacks on Israelis which followed a massacre by Baruch Goldstein of 29 Palestinians praying in a Hebron mosque. In fact these were initiated by Hamas, an organisation which largely owed its existence to Israeli support for Islamists as a counterweight to the PLO. Despite the signing of the Wye River accords in 1998 matters did not improve for the Palestinians. In 2000 secret negotiations took place at Camp David between Arafat and the Israeli PM Ehud Barak, brokered by President Clinton. But in the end Arafat refused to sign a document which amounted to an unconditional surrender to Israeli and US demands and the abandonment of any meaningful Palestinian power. Since then Israeli propaganda, under PM Ariel Sharon, has successfully portrayed Arafat as an enemy of peace, the problem rather than the solution.

To any informed observer, however, the problem is the determination of Israel to maintain and settle much and eventually no doubt all of the territories it conquered in 1967. It was interesting to hear President Bush

declaring, following his meeting with our PM, that the US was committed to the defence of Israel 'as a Jewish state'. His advisors, who inserted that phrase, knew what they were doing. It was the beginning of a campaign against the logical return to the one-state solution as a reaction to the blocking of Palestinian statehood. Such a unitary state could not be anywhere near exclusively Jewish without drastic measures, and would indeed soon comprise a majority of non-Jews. George Bush, no doubt with Tony Blair's support, has, by inserting this little phrase, announced his intention to support an apartheid solution in the whole of Palestine. What this would mean in practice is confining the Palestinians to their towns where they could eventually be starved out of the country.

Yassir Arafat's life was devoted to preventing such a disaster, and we owe it to his memory, whatever we may think about the particularities of his career, to continue his legacy of resistance to it. We will oppose the stinking hypocrisy which makes a settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict dependent on Palestinian democracy while Israel maintains a system where the one fifth of its non-Jewish population is excluded from full rights of citizenship. We will oppose the stinking hypocrisy which talks of the PA's corruption by those who fiddle elections in the US or lie to their own people in both the US and the UK to justify a war in contravention of the UN charter. We will oppose the stinking hypocrisy which insists on the end of Palestinian 'terrorism' but condones the use of massively superior military force to kill and progressively dispossess Palestinians, or, in another part of the Middle East, to kill Iraqis, occupy their land and steal their oil. We will oppose the stinking hypocrisy which denies Palestinian refugees the right of return but insists that every Jew in the world has the right to come to Israel and live there. And we will oppose the stinking hypocrisy which makes the late President Yassir Arafat the scapegoat for the non-resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict while ignoring the transparently unjust and racist ideology of Zionism which in reality lies at its roots.

May a new Palestinian leadership take over the baton handed to it by Yassir Arafat and reach the finishing post which eluded him. In so doing it will make the world a safer place for us all.