

## REMEMBERING “UNCLE ARAFAT”

*by Konstantin Medvedovsky*

Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, died on 11 November 2004 in Paris. His last days were watched intensely around the world with a mixture of anxiety, grief, and anticipation. For decades, Arafat’s life represented the hopes of the Palestinian people. However, only in death will those hopes have a chance of being realized. In the end, it was Arafat, more than anyone else, who stood in the way of a Palestinian state.

While many world leaders are eulogizing the man who brought the plight of the Palestinian people to the world stage, all too many are failing to acknowledge the tremendous disservice that Arafat did to his people over time.

French President Jacques Chirac said in a statement that Arafat was “a man of courage and conviction who has incarnated, for 40 years, the fight of Palestinians for the recognition of their national rights.” South African President Thabo Mbeki remarked “History will record that President Arafat epitomized that rare breed of leaders whose lives were defined by the unflinching sacrifices they made in the noble and just cause of the struggle of their peoples.” German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder



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Yasser Arafat.

called his death “a great loss for the Palestinian people.” Statements such as these, without accompanying caveats about the truth of who Arafat was, paint an unrealistic portrait of the man.

This is not to say that he was an “evil” man. For nearly 40 years, Arafat was a focal point for the region. He never failed to surprise the world with his ability to reinvent himself; he invented modern terrorism, launched by terrorist strikes against Israel and other Western targets in the mid 1960s, which helped precipitate the Six Day War. Arafat turned both Jordan and Lebanon into terrorist client states, a situation which persists in Lebanon to this day. His plan led to the 1972 Munich massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes. And then, in 1974, the world began to witness the slow transformation of a man.

In perhaps the most dramatic moment in the history of the United Nations, Arafat appeared before the General Assembly, pistol on his hip, and gave the brilliant speech which galvanized the world community into acknowledging that the situation in the Middle East was a world problem, not a regional one. In his closing remarks, he said “Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter’s gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.” The words shook the United Nations greatly, and pushed it to eventually go so far as to classify Zionism to be an official form of racism<sup>1</sup>.

His efforts did not immediately turn to political solutions. He continued to actively support terror against Israel for at least another fourteen years. But increasingly, nonviolent approaches took center stage in his efforts. He appeared to have evolved from a terrorist into a true statesman. He recognized U.N. Resolution 242, which called for a non-violent end to the situation in Israel. He publicly recognized Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign state in some form, and curtailed his calls for genocide

against the Jewish people. And then, in 1993 on the White House lawn, in a ceremony that many believed marked the beginning of the end of a century-long struggle, Arafat shook the hand of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Over the World War II era, Stalin was transformed from a man to be feared into “Uncle Joe.” Arafat’s image was similarly transformed. He came to be seen as an ally in the peace process, not an impediment. He morphed from a feared and hated terrorist, into a brilliant statesman who had managed to outdo and outthink many Israeli politicians. He became not a man who needed to be dealt with, but a man with whom Israel could deal. The new image of Arafat became so widely accepted that Leah Rabin invited “Uncle Arafat,” as she called him, to her home shortly after her husband was assassinated.

However, just as with Stalin, that is not where this sad story ends. Just as “Uncle Joe” was revealed to have been as bad, or worse, than initially believed, so it was with “Uncle Arafat.” While Israel prepared for a peace that many saw as inevitable, Arafat was extolling the virtues of martyrdom within the West Bank. The image of Arafat, the reasonable diplomat, was shattered forever in 2000 with the failure of the

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Oslo peace process.

While there are varying accounts of the specifics of the Israeli offer, President Clinton’s lead negotiator, Dennis Ross, has given perhaps the most credible account. Arafat rejected an offer of all of Gaza, 97 percent of the West Bank, and East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. Despite being offered exactly the state that he claimed he was so desperately fighting for, he walked away. Why? Because Israel could not agree to Arafat’s demand for the “right of return”—which would have guaranteed millions of Palestinians the right to move out of the territories and into Israel itself. The demand, which was the only one of Arafat’s which was not met, would have transformed Israel into a Palestinian state in all but name.

In the end, it became obvious that Arafat’s previous public acceptance of the existence of the state of Israel was nothing more than a public relations ploy. The world had placed its hopes for peace on his shoulders, and he accepted the burden, all the while using their naiveté to pursue his own agenda.

That is why, when we remember this man, we should remember him for whom he really was. Unlike the polite, but ultimately simplistic words of Chirac, Mbeki, and Schroeder, we need to remember that when his people really needed him, he let them down. That is the real tragedy of the man. More than failing Israel and United States, he failed his own people in 2000. It is because of his refusal that the Israelis and the Palestinians are in the situation they are in today.