

LA VANGUARDIA

November 15, 2004

"Arafat's Legacy"

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Within the last five years, five major Middle Eastern leaders have passed away, each with thirty or more years in power: Assad of Syria (1970-2000), Hussein of Jordan (1953-1999), Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahayan of the UAE (1965-2004), Hassan of Morocco (1961-1999), and now Yasir Arafat (1969-2004). At each of their deaths, there was debate and anxiety expressed about an easy succession, yet their successions were relatively smooth. Arafat's departed contemporaries devoted enormous energies to blending tribes, amalgamating divergent ethnic sects, balancing religious groups, and absorbing differing social classes into national identities. With pervasive domestic security organs they enforced their will, suppressed dissent to varying degrees, and maintained personal dominance over the political order. However, each of them developed some "mechanism" -- party, parliament, constitutional fabric, or process -- that created an internal backbone, allegiance to a collectivity. Though keeping power to themselves, they stitched together disparate social units into a common national identity with common goals. Diligent preparations guaranteed each one of them relatively stable transitions. To one degree or another, their fear in life was debilitating political scrambles at succession.

At Arafat's passing there is a similar degree of doubt about an easy succession, and yet early indications suggest a relative smooth transition. But unlike the passing of his peers who headed states with a defined outlook, the Palestinian national movement will need to decide who steers the national movement into its next phase, but also give a stamp to its political heading. When Assad, Hussein, Sheikh Zayed, and Hassan died, there were no doubts about who was a Syrian, Jordanian, Moroccan, etc. A state with functional institutions ran their countries. Arafat passes away while his national movement is not absolutely sure about its final borders or what of its historical past will keep it from finalizing its future. Succession is not merely about who rules, it is about what is being ruled and how the rules are made.

Arafat's Collectivity and Rule

The nature of the collectivity that Arafat ruled allowed him to dominate the Palestinian national movement. His autocracy ruled a liberation movement, not a full-fledged state. He died in the midst of the liberation movement deciding on whether struggle or accommodation would be the

fuel for its political engine. The constituencies Arafat represented were geographically disparate and philosophically diverse. He was the line that connected the dots between Palestinian dispersion and political diversity. Arafat's preference was internal consensus over controversy. Tightly, he wrapped the cause to liberate Palestine around his own persona. The two were virtually inseparable. A columnist in the Beirut Daily Star recently called his rule "near dictatorial." His definition of self-determination was "I determine by myself." Thus, if one criticized him, one was doing the unthinkable of criticizing the objective of liberating Palestine. Attention given by international leaders to him was oxygen for his ego and his struggle. Any visit with a foreign leader in Ramallah or in an international capital added prestige and currency to legitimacy and unqualified rule. He loved being treated as a head of state. He ran the PLO as if it were like all other states. Any resolution at the United Nations or at some other international body gave him and his cause a moral boost.

Arafat, like his peers, used patronage and security services to preserve domineering control. Additionally, he cemented the Palestinian national movement around sacrifice, victimization, and oppression. He was its messenger, emissary, and promoter. The source of his legitimacy was his commitment and courage to sustain the dream of returning to some or all of Palestine. An external power, most particularly Zionism and Israel, provided ready glue. Arafat kept the cause alive and his core control over the national movement by practicing classic patrimonialism. He was the law. He set the rules of political behavior and discourse. He decided when tactical or strategic shifts were required to steer the Palestinian Arab national movement around internal opponents and away from external intruders. He made adjustments and shifts in policy as he saw fit, not as others expected of him. He decided when to maintain the struggle against Israel through terrorism, force, or diplomacy. Being held accountable, either domestically or internationally, was not in his lexicon for rule.. His means were the vast sums of money that flowed to him and into PLO coffers. Control of the purse enabled him total control over the national movement. Disbursing funds lubricated his leadership; it kept detractors silent. Public resources were his private domain. Clientage, power and influence ran from him and to him at the same time. Arafat personalized power. It was tightly held, not shared. Rather than blending the disparate geographic and philosophical parts of a diverse Palestinian community preserved by independent institutions, he frustrated their development. He used the geographic dispersion of the Palestinian people and their historic social cleavages along family and village lines to his autocratic advantage. Creating or strengthening political institutions other than the ones he dominated, like the PLO or his Fatah Party, would establish threats to his leadership. Hence, he had no patience for power sharing; when forced to do so by events, it was

always temporary and inevitably reversible. A line of succession would have offered prospects to end his rule before he was ready.

While many Palestinians grumbled regularly about his dictatorial style, they rarely confronted him outright and continuously. And when there were bitter disagreements about his policy choices or even open rebellion to his rule, he squashed opposition voices either quickly or slowly, but usually eventually. When challenged from within the Palestinian community, he found ways to threaten, punish, or disregard those voices. How many times in the 1990s did Palestinians like Hanan Ashrawi, Saeb Erekat, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), Ahmed Qurei (Abu-Ala), Muhammad Dahlan, Jabril Rajoub, and Feisal Hussein, to name a few, disagreed with his policies, fumed at him, resigned from a post, only to return again to a position under his direction?

He successfully marketed the suffering of the Palestinian people, but did little to help them better their economic lot. Quite phenomenally, he sustained Arab and international support for the Palestinian cause, while he made egregious political mistakes. His open embrace of Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait caused more than 350,000 Palestinians to be expelled from Arab oil-producing states and their bank accounts confiscated. When Arafat refused to sign a previously negotiated agreement with the Israelis in 1994, Egypt's President Mubarak, who had given his prestige to that mediation, became so outraged at Arafat's delay in signing the document that he blurted out to Arafat, "Sign, you son of a dog!" Though he repeatedly renounced terrorism, his purchase of 50 tons of weapons from Iran, confiscated on the Karine A in January 2002 just four months after the attacks on the U.S., made him a virtual enemy of Americans. Hereafter, Arafat was seen as an undeniable bed partner to Osama Bin Laden. And yet, his leadership position in the national movement was so revered that he was not publicly shunted aside to take a ceremonial position of power in favor of the very men, Abu Mazin, Farouk Qaddumi, and Abu-Ala, who now dominate, for all practical purposes the PLO, the Fateh Party, and the Palestinian Authority.

Over time, Palestinian elements and Middle Eastern leaders sought to influence, usurp, undermine, or pay lip service to the Palestinian cause, PLO's prerogatives, and his role within it. Arafat made a career of fending off these challenges. When Middle Eastern leaders worried more about their own national interests than the Palestinian cause, or they sought to control Palestinian decision-making, he publicly shamed them for damaging the Palestinian quest to liberate Palestine. Arafat came to despise Egyptian President Sadat for wanting to represent the Palestinians at Camp David in 1978 and for making peace with Israel, but he turned it into a political and financial bonanza for the Palestinian cause and his rule. For decades, he struggled bitterly with Jordan's King Hussein about who should speak for the Palestinians, who should control the West Bank, or who should be the Arab custodian for Jerusalem,

should any part be liberated from Israel. Throughout the 1990s, Arafat's relationship with President Hafez al-Assad of Syria was frosty and disdainful as Arafat steered the Palestinian national movement free of the Syrian leader's desire for influence over it.

Arafat's three objectives in rule were constant: maintain the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; liberate any and all of Palestine through armed struggle or diplomacy; and retain absolute decision-making in his hands. While he gave American and European leaders perennial headaches, his machinations and steadfastness hyped the Palestinian cause for more than three decades. In using terrorism and refusing to sign an agreement with Israel finally ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he cultivated an Israeli predisposition to mistrust Arab leaders. In doing so, he galvanized Israeli identity to believe that Arafat was like the Czars, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hitler, Nasser, or Assad, who wanted to kill Jews. Israelis had reason to mistrust Arab leaders, but with Arafat their anxiety level reaching boiling levels. While he pillaged Palestinian funds to stay at the top of the heap, he kept an otherwise fragmented people from falling into political oblivion. He was admired and feared, loved and criticized, and the master of pulling strings, all the strings.

Let the Palestinians Decide

Arafat was the breathing symbol of the Palestinian cause. At every critical juncture, he squeezed the emotional tube because he was fighting for all Palestinians. And yet, he left a mixed legacy. Over the short haul, his death will not likely see an Israeli-Palestinian treaty, but perhaps a signed disengagement agreement after Israel's portended withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. A sign of Arafat's influence on the Palestinian community is not that he departs without a clear line of succession; it is to be found in the 2003 Palestinian Draft Constitution where power in the proposed Palestine state is to be concentrated only in the institutions of a parliament and an independent judiciary and not controlled or manipulated an autocratic president. The proposed president is to have ceremonial duties, much like the monarch in England or the Israeli president.