

Palestine after Arafat

Palestine

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Arafat is no more, although possible cause of his death being in doubt and conspiracy theories abounding the Palestinians have to quickly come to grips with the cruel reality of near chaos created by an implacable Israel with the tacit approval of the US. They have to take the measure of their enemies' strength and their own vulnerabilities. They have to act; life has to go on after Arafat.

The Palestinian people have paid a memorable send off to Abu Ammar, Yasser Arafat's nickname, that sent a message to Israel and its patrons that their will to persevere in the cause of somehow recreating Palestine, even a mini Palestine. The how of it will tax their will as well as ingenuity. One hopes they have it in them to achieve a credible collective leadership in the coming polls that can keep them democratically united for coming struggles — primarily by political means. The rest of the world owes to itself to support the Palestinians' inalienable rights.

In view of what Ariel Sharon, with US backing, has shown, Palestinians' need for international support assumes crucial importance. Israeli chicanery in encroaching upon West Bank lands — areas that Oslo accords had reserved for the mini Palestine-to-be — has created today's tragic situation. In addition to retaining these so-called settlements in West Bank areas, Israel also demanded of Arafat to forget about East Jerusalem and the right of return of the Palestinian Arab refugees, driven out of their homes in 1948. Arafat's fault was to refuse to accept these extra humiliating terms in Camp David in 2000. It is hard to imagine any elected Palestinian leadership conceding to Israel and US more than what Arafat was ready to do. If Israel actually needs peace and Arab acceptance, it has to curb its arrogance and to start regarding Arab citizens of old Palestine as human beings who have rights and needs.

Arafat was unique among the Arabs — larger-than-life symbol of Palestine that was and should be. He restored self-respect among Arabs in general by his indomitable stances and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Arafat was a product of Arab despair. His Palestine had been occupied by European Zionists who had inflicted a crushing defeat on all the Arab armies in 1948 and later on, in 1973, converted their initial reverses into defeat for the Arabs. Thus, Arafat faced tremendous odds in his liberation campaign.

Arafat was quintessentially a resistance figure who symbolised Palestinians' resistance against a more powerful enemy. Originally he did not accept the legitimacy of Israel. He regarded it as a history's greatest swindle. The Zionists were not local inhabitants of Palestine; they came from various countries of Europe and later Middle East. They had no claim on the land because each Zionist had lived permanently in Europe: they were born and educated there and had been well adjusted to the conditions in which Jews lived in Europe.

The Zionist movement, in retrospect, can now be seen as having been a colonialist and imperial venture, ably assisted by United Kingdom. They were allowed into Palestine and gradually grabbed a lot of its land. They organised themselves in brigades that constituted an informal army in 1948 that went on to defeat all effete Arab armies put together. Palestinians continue to face the problem



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of dealing with a triumphant usurper since 1948. Palestinians, later led by Arafat, continued to hold on to the idea of recreating the Palestine they had lost to Israelis until Yasser Arafat was persuaded by the Saudis and Americans in early 1970s to accept a two-state solution: Israel to have over 70 per cent of Palestine while the Palestinians were to live in the remaining parts. Through many further usurpations (settlements) the position today is that Arafat, the Mr Palestine, had to accept in Oslo Accord just 22 per cent of original Palestine in a two state solution because of the so-called 'facts on the ground'.

What the Oslo Accord offered was Gaza Strip and West Bank areas less the Jewish settlements and the roads that connected them; these were to remain under Israeli control. That meant a few Bantustans under constant surveillance of Israeli military, for settlements were so planned as to destroy the contiguity of territory for a possible Palestinian state. Oslo agreement was a prelude to final peace settlement. Some issues had been left for later agreement: the future of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinians that were driven out of their homes by Jews in 1948. Arafat had insisted that without East Jerusalem (which contains Al Quds Mosque) and refugees' right of return, there can be no agreement. That is where matters stand since 2000 when Arafat refused to accept the Israeli demands in Washington creating a deadlock and recent mayhem.

This situation stares the post-Arafat Palestinian Authority — that was supposed to have become the government of residual Palestine — being reconstituted in the promised election 60 days hence. Can it accept Sharon's humiliating terms? Can it forego refugees' right of return? Can it accept a permanent Israeli occupation of whole of Jerusalem? It is faced with a cruel choice. The dilemma is that Palestinians today are people without a state, under military occupation since 37 years: powerless, needy and without means of sustenance — because of unending military occupation's travails. No other Arab government stands by them, except for occasional cash aid. What will then PA do?

Arafat's political legacy would be controversial. Here was a great Arab and a Palestinian who stood up against the might of Israel behind which looms the superpower. He symbolised resistance against the occupation by European Zionists. He was Mr Palestine and an Arab who burnished the image of the Arabs for themselves. Can the elected PA do what Arafat refused to do?

Arafat left some negative legacies too. True, after Oslo, Arafat faced a no-win situation but he did not prove a good administrator of the newly created Palestinian Authority. He did not trust many associates and officials. He concentrated most powers in his own hands with no devolution of power and func-

tions. His administration was not free of corruption either. This is also a legacy. However, he still retained his integrity despite venial corruption of his associates or his own lack of administrative savvy. He towers over everyone else and will remain a father figure for most Palestinian patriots that still hope for a true Palestine state.

The question remains how should the Palestinians conduct themselves? Well, given the aggressive designs of Sharon and his growing constituency, the future can only be a difficult one. The Israeli aggression is not about to end, for it meets no countervailing force. The chapter of Resistance has to go on being written. It is not over. For the rest, the initiative will be in Israeli hands. Israel will remain the deciding factor. What it decides will be the fate of Palestinians to suffer — unless the Palestinians can counter it.

Now, everyone knows what the Israelis want: it is no secret that hardline Israelis are hell-bent on a Greater Israel, the Ersatz Israel, that comprises not merely Gaza and West Bank areas but also parts of Lebanon, Syria, and may be parts of Iraq. Remember Israelis have never defined their eastern boundary. That major powers accept this oddity is there for all to see.

Just as Zionists had no justification for coming and occupying Palestine, they will have no justification to occupy other areas of Syria, Iraq and or Jordan. It is pure colonialism with aggressive intent. The Palestinians have a job cut out for them. They have to resist Israeli transgressions. It will be hard to create a popular consensus among Palestinians on what to demand from Israel and how to struggle. There must be a red line beyond which even a defeated people ought not to concede. They would thus be daring Israel to do its worst, as indeed was the last stand of Arafat. But a conscious decision has to be openly and democratically taken. The world will watch what Israel does, perhaps in fascinated horror, as hitherto.

A word about the fair-minded liberals and left elements everywhere. Would they watch in silence the murder of a whole people — which is an ongoing process in occupied Gaza today? It is intended ethnic cleansing. Can the world not see the enormity of what has been done to Palestinians in 20th Century and how can justice be done to them now? Can the fair-minded not do for Palestine what they did in Feb 2003 over Iraq? Much has been heard of humanity's conscience. Why does it not stir? Has the old bad conscience of European and American liberals not been appeased by this long existence of Israel? Must it watch in silence what the Israelis might do to Palestinians?

Factually Palestinians do have the sympathy of a wide swathe of international public opinion and within the Arab world itself. But one danger emanates from the personal ambitions of some of Arafat's associates and the designs of Israel. If Arafat's successors do not stand together, they may have to hang separately. Unity among the Palestinians is the first prerequisite for any future for them. If they do not unite in the face of present emergency, they will probably lose the battles that lie ahead. For, many battles of survival have to be fought by the Palestinians — and not without much help from others. That is a cruel fate. But that is how things are.