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Moses in Reverse–The Real Yasser Arafat

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In the dangerous world of Arab politics and militias, Arafat pushed himself to the very top, becoming something of a “terrorist in chief” for the Palestinian people, all the while promising that they would one day return to their homeland as a victorious people. Now upon his death, his beleaguered people appear no closer to their goal of statehood and true peace than when he stepped onto the world stage.

Though he would often claim to have been born in Jerusalem, Yasser Arafat was actually born August 29, 1929 in Cairo, Egypt. He was the fifth child of a Palestinian merchant, and his life was dramatically changed when young Yasser’s mother died when he was only four years old. Arafat and his younger brother were sent to Jerusalem to live with an uncle.

Thus, Yasser Arafat was in the right place at the wrong time and when the so-called “War of Independence” ended in 1948 the state of Israel was established and Palestinian Arabs became exiles. By 1949, Arafat had moved back to Cairo in order to found the Palestinian Students’ League. Driven by a charismatic personality and a sense of personal destiny, Arafat pushed himself to the top of the student movement and made his debut on the world scene in 1956, when he appeared at an International Student Congress meeting in Prague wearing a kaffiyeh—his trademark Palestinian headdress—and put himself forward as a spokesman for the Palestinian people.

With the State of Israel growing economically and militarily, and gaining the world’s respect, young Palestinians like Yasser Arafat grew restless, pushing Arab nations toward war with Israel and promising the return of Palestinian Arabs to their homeland. In 1965, Arafat formed his “Fatah” guerilla movement and began his systematic and strategic attacks upon Israel. In the aftermath of the Arabs’ disastrous 1967 war, Arafat became the chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization [PLO]. His leadership of that organization would introduce the Western world to terrorism in a new form.

Arafat was tragically incompetent as a politician. He earned the distrust of the Arab governments he called upon to give him cover and support, and his misreading of King Hussein of Jordan would lead to “Black September” and the expulsion of the PLO from Jordanian territory.

Frustrated with a lack of progress and determined to make the world take notice of its cause, the PLO turned to a methodology of mass terror in 1972 when a newly-named “Black September” branch of the organization hijacked airplanes and then infamously seized Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games.

The Munich attack became a milestone in the tragic story of twentieth century terrorism. Even as the Germans had hoped to host a peaceful Olympic Games as a way of demonstrating the stable recovery of their country after World War II, the event instead became a symbol for a century gone horribly wrong. No one anticipated an attack of this scale. As

Tony Walker and Andrew Gowers, authors of *Arafat: The Biography*, commented: "Israel's intelligence community had concluded that it would face continuing Palestinian terrorism, including the danger of spectacular and eye-catching operations, but none of Israel's three intelligence and security services dreamed that the Palestinians would seek to disrupt the Olympic Games, the world's most sacred sporting occasion." Nevertheless, on September 5, 1972 a group of eight commandos breached Olympic security and forced their way into the headquarters of the Israeli Olympic team. Before the end of the ordeal, eleven Israeli team members would die. Most notably, the entire world was able to watch these tragic events unfold on live television.

The very next year, the Black September group struck again, this time attacking American diplomatic personnel in Khartoum, Sudan. The group kidnapped U. S. Ambassador Cleo A. Noel and diplomat G. Curtis Moore. The commandos gave the American government, along with Jordan and West Germany, a set of radical demands. The governments refused to bargain with the hostage-takers, and on March 2, 1973 the PLO's Black September organization coldly executed the two American diplomats along with Guy Eid of the Belgian diplomatic corps.

Nevertheless, in spite of Arafat's undeniable complicity in the terror attacks, he was welcomed onto the world stage and invited to address organizations such as the United Nations. He was granted celebrity status in much of Western Europe, and he developed strategic and covert partnerships with various radical organizations throughout the world.

By the late 1980s, however, it was apparent that Arafat's leadership was getting the PLO nowhere, and the only Arab state that had regained territory lost to Israel was Egypt, which had negotiated its gains through diplomacy and peace with Israel. On December 12, 1988, Yasser Arafat announced that he and his organization would renounce terrorism and accept Israel's right to exist. Formal negotiations with Israel produced an agreement on Palestinian autonomy that was formalized in an accord signed by Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Oslo, Norway. Rabin and Arafat would later fly to Washington and appear with President Bill Clinton at the White House. Their famous handshake would give the world hope that peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis might actually be possible.

Demonstrating the victory of hope over prudence, the Swedish Academy presented Arafat and Rabin with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, the year Arafat returned to Palestine from his twenty-six years of exile. Just over a year later, Arafat was elected president of the Palestinian Authority.

This period of hopefulness ended in 2000, however, as Arafat committed the most significant political blunder of his career: He walked away from the most generous offer ever made by an Israeli government. In conversations with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, hosted by President Bill Clinton at Camp David, Arafat had been presented with a choice. Barak offered him more than Arafat could have dreamed, pledging to return almost all of the occupied territories and granting the proposed Palestinian state the right to rule over Arab sections of Jerusalem and to operate aircraft in Israeli air space. Arafat coldly rejected the offer, leading President Clinton and American diplomats to believe that they had been betrayed by the PLO leader.

The situation went from bad to worse after the second intifada [uprising] was launched in September of that year. The last four years have seen an escalation of suicide bombings, terrorist attacks, Israeli reprisals, and a general sense of distrust and hatred that has poisoned the Palestinian political well.

In the end, Yasser Arafat deserved the blame for these developments. Rather than leading his people into peace, prosperity, and world respect, he presented the Palestinians with a lie and a toxic mix of false hopes. As British historian Andrew Sinclair would remark, Arafat became "the reverse Moses of his wandering people." This "Moses in reverse" led his people into further violence rather than peace, and fed them a steady diet of hatred laced with terrorism.

Arab commentator Fouad Ajami commented: "He would be neither a Palestinian David Ben-Gurion leading his people toward practical politics and statehood nor an Anwar Sadat accepting the logic of peace and compromise." Ajami blames Arafat for leaving a void in Palestinian leadership after his own death, for he did not love his people enough to provide for their steady leadership in his absence. "He indulged his people's worst fantasies and squandered great opportunities that opened up for them," Ajami notes.

President George W. Bush signaled a change in U. S. policy on April 4, 2002 when he made a speech in the White House Rose Garden in response to Israel's launching of "Operation Defensive Shield," intended to punish Palestinian terrorism. President Bush accused Arafat of having "betrayed the hopes of the people he was supposed to lead." The

American President stated that the Palestinian people “deserve a government that respects human rights and a government that focuses on their needs—education and health care—rather than feeding their resentments.”

That last line perfectly expresses the leadership legacy of Yasser Arafat. He stoked his people’s resentment and thus left them ill-prepared for the realities of negotiation, state building, and political accountability.

As Fouad Ajami laments, “The world indulged Yasser Arafat, gave him plenty of room to maneuver, showered him with aid and money, and graciously offered him a place of prominence in the diplomatic game.” Arafat, he said, was “a juggler who never knew when history came calling, who would never accept the burden of choice and the logic of political responsibility.”

We must all now hope and pray for a Palestinian leader who will be a true statesman, a leader who will transform resentment into a determined dream of peace, statehood, and stability. Such a leader must recognize that Israel is not only a permanent political reality, but an example to the Palestinians of what can be done when a determined people take responsibility, give sacrificially, and devote themselves to the building of a nation and the shaping of a future. The Palestinian people do not deserve and cannot afford another Moses in reverse.

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