

Yasser Arafat

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By Oona King

The first time I met Yasser Arafat was in 1998. I had been an MP for just over a year, and I was keen to meet the man who told the United Nations 'I carry an olive branch in one hand and a freedom fighter's gun in the other'. His Ramallah headquarters were spartan yet neat. There was no sign of the rubble and bombs that would engulf the compound when I returned five years later.

I was with six other MPs and we were concerned by his appearance: his hands and face were white, drained of colour. His lips were blue. His eyes were cloudy and his mind seemed to lose the threads of our conversation. An aide often answered our questions on his behalf. I left the meeting deeply worried about the prospects for his health, fearing he wouldn't survive the year. But by the time I returned to Ramallah in 2003, everything had changed: the outside of his compound was utterly destroyed, but Yasser Arafat was stronger on the inside than ever. Gone was the deathly blue pallor from his lips, his eyes were bright and sparkling, and he had a clear grasp of the situation.

During the meeting, the sound of a missile exploded nearby. 'They can destroy our homes,' he said, 'but they cannot destroy our souls.' This time there were only two MPs in the meeting, and we were accompanied by Hanan Ashrawi. Arafat sat in his trademark keffiyeh - the black and white scarf that came to represent the Palestinian leader around the world. It was pinned over his right shoulder, deliberately fashioned in the shape of the future state of Palestine. Behind him was a picture of Jerusalem's golden dome, Islam's third most holy place, the place he hoped to be buried.

We spoke about the occupation, the illegal settlements, the home demolitions, the destruction of crops, the land confiscation, and the water stolen from Palestinians to fill Israeli swimming pools. After our 45 minutes were up, I thanked Abu Ammar - as he is known to all Palestinians - for his time, and was about to leave. 'No, no,' he said, waiving away his aides, 'we haven't finished talking.' I sat back down, and he told me of the need to get an international peace-keeping force into the Occupied Territories.

I had already asked him: 'What is the most important thing the British Government can do?' He answered without a second's hesitation: 'Push forward with the Americans. The Americans are the key. Britain has the strongest relationship with them. That is useful to us. A strong relation between Bush and Blair will help us. But you must push for the implementation of the Road Map, you must push for international observers to monitor it immediately. And don't forget, you have a historic responsibility dating from the British Mandate in Jerusalem.'

At this point Hanan Ashrawi, the respected Secretary General of the PLO intervened. She pointed out that the Israeli assassination attempt of Hamas leader Abdul-Aziz al Rantisi a few days earlier (the Israelis finally killed him this year) was actually a political assassination of the fledgling Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen - because by making the Gaza Strip erupt, the Israelis prevented a moderate like Abu Mazen from succeeding. 'After all you must remember,' she explained, 'that Hamas was originally encouraged and established by the Israelis, to undermine the Palestinian leadership.'

It was true that the Gaza Strip was now in flames, and this pushed power away from the Palestinian leadership, towards extremists. On the day of the Rantisi assassination attempt, I arrived by coincidence in the Gaza Strip to meet Palestinian politicians. The Israelis sealed the border, and I couldn't get out. So wearing a head-scarf and salwar kameez that I bought in Bangladesh, I slipped into the noisy crowd that gathered by the hospital where Rantisi had been taken. Every now and then the crackle of machine-gun fire filled the air. Masked PLO gunmen let me pass, and I sat on a pavement corner, grateful that none of the men shouting imagined I was a British MP. But despite all the noise, most of the Palestinians I saw just stood around waiting. They have been waiting for a Palestinian state since before 1948.

The creation of a Palestinian State will only happen when the world's most powerful country, the United States, stops bank-rolling and protecting the Israelis. The Palestinian leadership understand this very well. They know it is America that funds the Israeli army. Israel has done everything Iraq has done, and more - flouted UN resolutions, invaded its neighbour's territory, developed nuclear weapons - and yet it faces no sanctions or action from

America.

What is the British Government doing to support the Palestinians? We are the largest funder of the Palestinian Authority – Palestinians get more money from the British than they do from the Saudis. Is it enough? No. As Yasser Arafat told me, it is our job to push the Americans to implement the Road Map for peace. If there is any person on the planet that can persuade George Bush to help create a Palestinian State, it is the British Prime Minister.

Hanan Ashrawi returned to this theme. “Bush’s change in stance is nothing short of a miracle. The Israeli’s are as distressed by it as we are amazed. That’s why the Israelis have lobbed in a grenade in the shape of the helicopter gunship attack on Rantisi. Giving Hamas a martyr undermines the Palestinian Authority. And it makes it unlikely America’s change in language will be matched by a change in action.” Hanan has been proved exactly right.

When I finally got up to leave the meeting with Yasser Arafat I remembered a request a young Bengali in Tower Hamlets had made: “if you go to Palestine, will you get me a Yasser Arafat scarf?” Who better to ask than Yasser Arafat? The PLO President’s response was immediate – he burst out laughing, “of course, of course! But do you have time to wait with me a bit longer?” “Of course, Sir,” I replied. And we sat and chatted a bit longer until one of his aides returned. The atmosphere was relaxed. Hanan told me this had been “a break-through meeting: the first I’ve sat through in my life without a cigarette!” And Yasser Arafat laughed when I told him about slipping into the crowd in the Gaza Strip – “yes – you could fit into the Arab Street. Ha ha! You’re the first British MP I’ve met who could!”

I think of that meeting sometimes when I look at Jerusalem’s golden dome. I bought a picture of it in the Palestinian quarter of Jerusalem, and it hangs on my bedroom wall. So, a year later, with Yasser Arafat buried in Ramallah, not Jerusalem, do I think George Bush genuinely wants justice for Palestinians? No. Do I think Tony Blair can persuade him it’s in his own interests? Possibly. And what will happen if Tony Blair fails? Palestinians will fall further into desperate poverty, and hopes of a Palestinian state will recede further. At Prime Minister’s Question time I asked Tony Blair if he would prioritise the creation of a Palestinian state. He told me he would. He describes justice for Palestinians as "the single most pressing political challenge in our world today."

I agree.