

# Who Killed Palestine?

Contributed by Administrator  
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Bill Clinton did it. Yasser Arafat did it. So did George W. Bush, Yitzhak Rabin, Hosni Mubarak, Ariel Sharon, Al-Jazeera and the BBC. The list of culprits in the whodunit called "Who Killed Palestine?" is neither short nor mutually exclusive. But since future historians are bound to ask the question, let's get a head start by suggesting some answers.

And make no mistake: No matter how much diplomatic, military and financial oxygen is pumped into Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority, it's oxygen flowing to a corpse. Palestine has always been a notional place, a field of dreams belonging only to those who know how to keep it. Israelis have held on to their state because they were able to develop the political, military and economic institutions that a state requires to survive, beginning with its monopoly on the use of legitimate force. In its nearly 14 years as an autonomous entity, the PA has succeeded in none of that, despite being on the receiving end of unprecedented international good will and largesse.

Hamas's seizure of the Gaza Strip this month -- and the consequent division of the PA into two hostile, geographically distinct camps -- is only the latest in a chain of events set in motion when Israel agreed, in September 1993, to accept Arafat and the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. An early indicator of what lay ahead took place on July 1, 1994, when Arafat made his triumphal entry into Gaza while carrying, in the trunk of his Mercedes, four of the Palestinian cause's most violent partisans. Among them were the organizers of the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre and the 1974 Ma'alot school massacre. If ever there was an apt metaphor for what Arafat's rule would bring, this was it.

Arafat was determined to use Gaza and the West Bank as a staging ground for attacks against Israel, and he said so publicly and repeatedly: "O Haifa, O Jerusalem, you are returning, you are returning" (1995); "We will make life unbearable for Jews by psychological warfare and population explosion" (1996); "With blood and spirit we will redeem you, Palestine" (1997). With equal determination, the Clinton administration and the Israeli governments of Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak treated Arafat's remarks as only so much rhetorical bluster. Mr. Clinton desperately wanted a Nobel Peace Prize; Israelis wanted out of the occupation business at almost any cost. These were respectable goals, but neither had as its primary aim the creation of a respectable Palestinian state.

Later, after the second intifada had erupted in all its suicidal frenzy, former U.S. negotiator Dennis Ross would admit the Clinton administration became too obsessed with process at the expense of substance. He should give himself more credit. The decision to legitimize Arafat was Israel's, not America's; once he was brought inside the proverbial tent he was bound to put a match to it. Still, the Clinton administration elevated Arafat like no other leader of the 1990s. If the rais came to flatter himself as a second Saladin, the flattery of White House banquets surely played a role.

The global media also did their bit in Arafat's elevation. Successive generations of Jerusalem bureau chiefs developed a conveniently even-handed narrative pitting moderates on both sides against extremists on both sides -- a narrative in which Arafat was a "moderate" and Ariel Sharon was an "extremist." When Mr. Sharon took his famous walk on the Temple Mount in September 2000, it was easy to cast him as the villain and Palestinian rioters -- and, later, suicide bombers -- as the justifiably aggrieved. Cheering Palestinians on from the sidelines were the Arab media and the governments that own them, happy to channel domestic discontent toward a foreign drama.

As with individuals, nations generally benefit from self-criticism, and sometimes from the criticism of others. No people in modern history have been so immune from both as the Palestinians. In 1999, Abdel Sattar Kassem, a professor of political science in the Palestinian city of Nablus, put his name to the "petition of the 20," written to "stand against [Arafat's] tyranny and corruption." Arafat imprisoned him; the rest of the world barely took notice. Arafat's global popularity reached its apogee in the spring of 2002, exactly at the same time the civilian Israeli death toll from terrorism reached its height.

Yet what served Arafat's interests well served Palestinian interests poorly. Arafat learned from his experience with Mr. Clinton that one could bamboozle an American president and not pay a price. George W. Bush took a different view and effectively shut the Palestinians out of his agenda. Arafat learned from the "international community" that no one would look too closely at where its foreign aid was spent. But a reputation for theft has been the undoing of Fatah. Arafat thought he could harness the religious power of "martyrdom" to his political ends. But at the core of every suicide

bombing is an act of self-destruction, and a nation that celebrates the former inevitably courts the latter.

Above all, Arafat equated territory with power. But what the experience of an unoccupied Gaza Strip has shown is the Palestinians' unfitness for political sovereignty. There are no Jewish settlers to blame for Gaza's plight anymore, no Israeli soldiers to be filmed demolishing Palestinian homes. The Israeli right, which came to detest Mr. Sharon for pulling out of the Strip, might reconsider its view of the man and the deed. Nothing has so completely soured the world on the idea of a Palestinian state as the experience of it.

What does this mean for the future? At yesterday's summit in Egypt, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah threw rose petals at Mr. Abbas's feet. But the potentates of the Middle East will not midwife into existence a state the chief political movement of which has claims to both democratic and Islamist legitimacy. The U.S. and Israel will never bless Hamastan (even if the EU and the U.N. come around to it) and they can only do so much for the feckless Mr. Abbas. "Palestine," as we know it today, will revert to what it was -- shadowland between Israel and its neighbors -- and Palestinians, as we know them today, will revert to who they were: Arabs.

Whether there might have been a better outcome is anyone's guess.