

Trail of ‘targeted killings,’ repeated threats stir suspicions of Israeli hand in Arafat’s death

Was it an Assassination?

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Lebanon Star’s Editor’s note: With recent media reports suggesting that Palestinian President Yasser Arafat’s death may have been the result of foul play, and with theories speculating that the late leader may have been poisoned or infected with the HIV virus, the question of who is behind the assassination has also been raised. Suggesting that Israel had the most to gain from Arafat’s death, Middle East reporter Trish Schuh has compiled the following timeline of developments in Israel and the United States leading up to Arafat’s death on November 11, 2004. Schuh is a freelance journalist who has worked for ABC News, Al-Arabiya, Muslim’s Weekly, Asia Times, Tehran Times and Counterpunch. She studied Arabic and Islam at Bir Zeit University in Palestine and observed the 2005 elections in Palestine.

Yasser Arafat’s removal was a triumph for Israel. It fulfilled demands for the election of anti-Intifada Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and his associates who “work well with Israel and America,” and whose commitment to disarm the Palestinians will enable Israeli land theft for settlements to continue without resistance or reprisal from undefended Palestinians.

Israel achieved Arafat’s demise: “The obstacle to peace will be eradicated forever.”

A ‘road map’ for the end of the Arafat era

According to President George W. Bush’s closest advisers, the American president had a radical change of heart in January 2002, when he decided for the first time that Arafat was an irredeemable terrorist unfit as a peace partner. Israel confiscated the Iranian freighter Karine A in the Red Sea with a cargo of munitions, en route to Gaza militants. Upon receiving evidence from the CIA via Mossad that Arafat had knowledge of the shipment, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon got what he always wanted: America’s de facto elimination of Arafat as leader of the Palestinian Authority.

With Washington watching, Israeli tanks surrounded Arafat’s Ramallah compound while Sharon’s Cabinet discussed deporting Arafat. Under intense American and European pressure, Sharon promised Bush not to assassinate Arafat. Middle East Newline reported that then-Secretary of State Colin Powell then approached Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia to provide Arafat safe haven. All refused.

On April 1, 2002, World Tribune.com reported that Morocco agreed to provide Arafat asylum. After insisting that 70 Hamas and Fatah colleagues accompany him, the Knesset rejected the proposal, arguing that he would be far more dangerous out of sight, operating a

government-in-exile. A month later, both U.S. Houses of Congress passed resolutions of overwhelming support for Israel and condemning Arafat as a “terrorist” and a “despot.”

On June 24, 2002, from the White House Rose Garden, Bush issued a critical foreign policy shift. In what analysts deemed “the death knell for Yasser Arafat,” Bush publicly called for regime change in Palestine. He later began to parrot Sharon rhetoric, saying the U.S. would no longer deal with Arafat or acknowledge him as the Palestinians’ leader.

In the final months of 2002, Israeli experts advised U.S. Justice Department lawyers on how to legalize extrajudicial killings. The February 7, 2003, edition of the Jewish Forward reported on an unprecedented legal document developed for the U.S. by Israel. It contained a comprehensive set of justifications for state-terror assassinations, and revealed the Bush administration’s involvement in such schemes. Bush now characterized terrorists caught – but denied rights to trial – as being “otherwise dealt with.” Israeli sources also revealed that Mossad was training the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency on how to implement covert “hits” with expertise gained fighting the Palestinians – car bombs, snipers, cell phone explosives, high tech devices and poisoning – and how to disguise them as “unexplained events and accidents.”

Former Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine official and long time Arafat spokesman Abu Bassam Sharif received a letter in December 2002 from friends in the Israeli peace movement warning of a plot to poison Arafat. (The Guardian, December 16, 2004.)

As a step toward regime change, Israel and the U.S. forced Arafat to appoint Mahmoud Abbas Prime Minister in February 2003. Abbas’ choice for State Security Minister, Gazan Mohammad Dahlan, was favored by the Bush-Sharon team for his pledge to eliminate Palestinian resistance to Israeli attacks and settlements. According to the article “U.S. Quietly Backing Anti-Arafat Reform Movement” in Geostategy-Direct.com, Americans “worked with” Dahlan to fund and train his 1,000-man militia for a coup d’etat against Arafat by 2005. Arafat biographer Said Aburish noted that torture of prisoners thrived under Dahlan’s rule in the 1990’s. Arafat refused Dahlan’s appointment. Abbas resigned in September, 2003 over control of the Palestinian Security Services.

Reacting to increased Palestinian attacks in August 2003, Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz declared “all out war” on the militants whom he vowed “marked for death.” In mid-September, Israel’s government passed a law to get rid of Arafat. Israel’s Cabinet for political security affairs declared it “a decision to remove Arafat as an obstacle to peace.” Mofaz threatened: “We will choose the right way and the right time to kill Arafat.” Palestinian Minister Saeb Erekat told CNN he thought Arafat was the next target. CNN asked Sharon spokesman Raanan Gissan if the vote meant the expulsion of Arafat. Gissan clarified: “It doesn’t mean that. The Cabinet has today resolved to remove this obstacle. The time, the method, the ways by which this will take place will be decided separately, and the security services will monitor the situation and make the recommendation about proper action.”

The Jerusalem Post (September 11, 2003) advocated: “We must kill Arafat because the world leaves us no alternative. When the breaking point arrives, there is no point in taking half measures. If we are to be condemned in any case, we might as well do it right.”

Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said: “We are trying to eliminate all the heads of

terror, and Arafat is one of the heads of terror. ... Arafat can no longer be a factor in what happens here. The question is: How are we going to do it? Expulsion is certainly one of the options, and killing is also one of the options” and “killing Arafat is an open choice for us, definitely one of the options.” Sharon said: “Killing Arafat, more than any other act, would demonstrate that the tool of terrorism is unacceptable.”

The Israeli Army Central Command then refined “Operation New Leaf” – code word of the military operation for Arafat’s elimination and its aftermath. Updated repeatedly in the year before his death, the plan included methods for his killing and burial site, riot prevention, protection of settlements from Palestinian backlash, and even instructions for the army’s soldiers “not to appear too joyful at his death” to avoid provoking grieving Palestinians. A propaganda plan was also formulated to deprive Arafat of a hero’s status through a noncombat, “natural” death.

Sharon spokesman Raanan Gissan said: “The issue is how to best remove this obstacle without making him a martyr.” Army Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon suggested: “We should kill Arafat softly. ... We must kill him softly and throw him out of the PA Presidential Palace and find an alternative leadership. I’m sure Mohammad Dahlan is qualified for this mission.”

In November 2003, Israel and the U.S. installed new Prime Minister Ahmad Qorei to succeed Abbas. Qorei also battled Arafat to appoint Dahlan as head of security. By February 2004, Palestinian legislators discovered that multimillionaire Qorei’s family business, Al Quds Cement, had been selling Israel its concrete to build the notorious “Apartheid Wall.” The U.K. Telegraph also reported Qorei company cement mixers making deliveries to the Maale Adumim Jewish settlements. In Gaza, cement merchants closely connected to Qorei through Dahlan reaped exorbitant profits manufacturing cement for Israeli construction projects. Both men are hailed in Washington as “moderates we can work with.”

Responding to a double suicide attack planned in Gaza, Time Magazine reported that Sharon’s security Cabinet decided on March 16, 2004 to execute Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin on March 21. Despite world outrage at his assassination, then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice defended the killing, saying: “Let’s remember that Hamas is a terrorist organization and that Sheikh Yassin has himself personally, we believe, been involved in terrorist planning.”

Arafat ‘Marked for Death’

Sharon’s White House visit on April 14, 2004, resulted in a deal with the Bush administration to radically alter the Middle East. In exchange for Israel’s Gaza pullout, the U.S. agreed to Sharon’s security request – the “dismantling” of a list of terror threats: Arafat, Nasrallah, Hamas, Hizbullah, and Iranian nuclear capability. When Sharon presented Bush with “proof” that Arafat was responsible for the October 2003 attack on a U.S. convoy in Gaza killing three Americans, Bush finally acceded to Arafat’s targeted removal.

Yemen’s Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qibri warned: “The United States bears responsibility for what happens, since after every visit by Sharon to Washington he commits more terrorism and more assassinations.”

After rescinding his earlier promise to Bush not to harm Arafat, Sharon then branded Arafat a “legitimate target.” “Whoever aims to kill Jews, whoever sends murderers to kill Jews, is ‘marked for death.’” He later threatened in the Hebrew daily Yediot Aharonot, “We operated

against Ahmad Yassin and [Abdel-Aziz] Rantissi and some other murderers at a time that seemed right to us. On the subject of expelling Arafat we will behave according to the same principle: we will do it at a convenient time. As we behaved toward other murderers, so we will behave toward Arafat."

Maariv published a terrorist "deck of cards" from Sharon's list of those "marked for death." "Everyone is in our sights," said Internal Security Minister Tsahi Hanegbi. "There is no immunity for anyone. And that means anyone - down to the last person."

Yaalon added that those on the list "understand it is nearing them." Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom also warned that the removal of Arafat was "closer than ever."

In July 2004, riots protesting Palestinian Authority corruption spread from Gaza to the West Bank cities of Jenin and Nablus. According to WorldTribune.com, Dahlan, with U.S. help, had been coordinating the revolt to strengthen himself as a future successor to Arafat. The powerful lobby, American-Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) stated: "International pressure coordinated with Palestinian opponents of Arafat's rule could accelerate a Palestinian leadership change."

(Palestinian sources later claim Dahlan had also directed an assassination plot against Yasser Arafat's relative, PA military intelligence commander Moussa Arafat. After his assassination in 2005, Israeli Haaretz says Moussa's killing "strengthens moderates in the PA.")

In the U.S., a New York Post columnist quoted an Israeli official at the Republican National Convention in August 2004 as saying: "Arafat will die this year." The Israeli continued, "I've never steered you wrong about the Middle East before. I know what I'm saying. Arafat dies this year. ... Don't ask me more."

On September 6, 2004, Mofaz reiterated to Israel's Army Radio, the government's 2003 official decision to end Arafat's reign; "The State of Israel will find the way and the right time to bring about the removal of Yasser Arafat from the region."

Within a month, Arafat had fallen mysteriously ill. From the first announcement, the American press definitively portrayed Arafat as already dying. In Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority prevented his personal physician, Dr. Ashraf al-Kurdi, from examining Arafat until it was too late to save him or get an antidote. Kurdi said Arafat knew he was dying: "Yes, actually I heard from him in Ramallah that he thought he'd been poisoned."

By November 11, 2004, Arafat was dead from undiagnosed causes. After examining his medical dossier, Arafat's nephew Nasser al-Qidwa claimed Arafat was poisoned. In an interview at his Amman office, Kurdi told me: "I suspect Arafat died of a killing poison, a catalyst."

Kurdi's request for an autopsy was denied by PA officials. Addressing Al-Jazeera, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal declared: "I accuse Israel of having poisoned the blood of Abu Ammar." Referring to a 1997 Mossad attempt to poison him, Meshal said: "French and Arab doctors may not be able to find evidence, as they could not find proof in my blood when I was poisoned, but Israel was forced to bring an antidote after two of its agents were held in Jordan."

The October 29, 2004, edition of the New York Post admitted: "Israel has been preparing for

his demise for months, including his possible burial site.” In accordance with the propaganda dictates of Operation New Leaf, the last public image of Arafat alive was the antithesis of a national warrior. Sharon told Haaretz, “It is feared that after his funeral Arafat will become a national hero and freedom fighter.” The only photo of Arafat not in military fatigues, the New York Post showed him in pajamas, shriveled, weak, wearing a “dunce cap” and looking like a pathetic child.

Former Bush speechwriter David Frum utilized a frequent Mossad homosexual slur, asking: “Does Yasser Arafat Have AIDS?”

After Arafat

In January, 2005, I requested an interview at the Palestinian Authority Information Ministry, with the committee investigating Arafat’s death. “We have been ordered not to speak of this by our officials at the highest level,” I was told. Though Arafat was a world figure for two generations, any investigation into his death has been banned. World governments and media remain strangely silent.

As a U.S. official said in 2002: “Arafat’s removal will pave the way for the emergence of moderate leadership” compliant to Israel’s security needs.

The “new” Palestinian leadership of Abbas, Qorei and Dahlan is the old team of corruption and collaboration, without resistance. Comprised of leaders who “work well” with Israel and America, Israeli land theft for West Bank settlements will continue without “obstacles.”

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