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Nov. 11, 2004 10:54

Remember the man, not the legend

By [FRIMET ROTH](#)



Any respect given to the dying or dead Arafat offends not only the memory of his Israeli victims but the Palestinian people themselves

Fantastic Arafat eulogies are the name of the media game. They praise Arafat the symbol of Palestinian nationalism, or Arafat the dedicated leader, or Arafat the selfless man of modest tastes. No one seems able to say, "Hang on. The emperor has no clothes. In fact, he's been naked for the past four decades."

BBC's Barbara Plett led the pack when she described Arafat's life as one of "sheer dedication and resilience." So emotional was she over his illness, she reported, that "When the helicopter carrying the frail old man [to Paris for medical treatment] rose above his ruined compound, I started to cry - without warning."

Yitzhak Frankenthal, founder of the Parents' Circle-Families Forum, was close behind on



Malki Roth

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Ynet: "Arafat is a leader on a par with Ben-Gurion and George Washington - a nation-builder. Many top-tier Israeli leaders I have met are dwarfs beside him."

Uri Avneri sat flanked by his gallery of framed Arafat portraits during a recent Sky News interview.

A Haaretz editorial urged Prime Minister Sharon not to treat the death of "a neighboring country's revered leader as a time for revenge and account-settling." It considered him, despite the many Israeli deaths he is responsible for, as the "man who symbolized more than anything, the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation from Israeli occupation."

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Israeli newscasters have been delicately discussing Arafat's "going to his world" (biblical Hebrew for "passing away") instead of "dying." They have apologized to listeners for raising the subject of his funeral while he is still alive. Would they tiptoe around the deathbed of any other mass murderer?

I have my own Arafat eulogy.

On april 2 of this year, amidst talk of Israel's intention to either assassinate or deport Yasser Arafat, the following news item appeared on the front page of Haaretz. It embodies, in my opinion, the man's depravity:

"The office of PA Chairman, Yasser Arafat, turned recently to senior members of the Fatah and of Palestinian Security mechanisms to instruct them to volunteer their family members as 'human shields' for the Chairman."

The article, written by Amos Harel, continued: "The PA's intention is to provide Arafat with a permanent 'guard' of women and children from these families in order to obstruct possible attempts by Israel to harm him - Palestinian women and children will remain in the Mukata even at night."

Here was a multibillionaire who not only milked his impoverished people of desperately needed charity dollars, but also required them to endanger their very lives to save his skin.

Any respect given to the dying or dead Arafat offends not only the memory of his Israeli victims, but the Palestinian people themselves. In honoring him, in accommodating his family and cronies, the world informs the Palestinians that their suffering at Arafat's hands doesn't rate; that ultimately what matters, what will be recorded in the history books, is not the truth but the legend of Arafat.

It is quite possible that our hopes for a better, post-Arafat tomorrow will be dashed. Palestinians may well conclude that a new, young Arafat-style leader would suit the world just fine. Those moderate Palestinians, too frightened until now to initiate change, may see no option but to continue hiding behind their wall of silence.

Several days after the August 2001 suicide bombing at Jerusalem's Sbarro pizzeria, in which 15 Israelis (including my 15-year-old daughter, Malki) perished, an Israeli government

minister appeared on the evening news. He disclosed that on the morning of the attack, Israeli authorities had received concrete intelligence about a terrorist heading on foot across town. With no clues as to his specific whereabouts, they urgently contacted Arafat's office and pleaded for cooperation in locating and stopping the would-be murderer. Arafat flat out refused any assistance, sealing the fate of that afternoon's victims.

Remember with me the Arafat of fact, not legend.



OPINION

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