

YASSER HAS BECOME "YES SIR"

MID-EAST REALITIES Editorial

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Watching Yasser Arafat interviewed by CNN's Larry King on 3/3/97 was rather surreal. Arafat is clearly lost and confused much of the time. He desperately clings to petty slogans and makes meaningless, oftentimes confusing, gestures both rhetorically and facially. "The Chairman" is near totally now reduced to "vassal" or "collaborator" status -- to quote two of the best-known Palestinian intellectuals in the U.S.

Few will say it for attribution before the cameras or in print, but more and more this man Arafat is a terrible embarrassment to his own people. The same Jews who loathed him just a few years ago now fondle him with glee. The same politicians who ridiculed and denounced him just a few years ago now desperately prop him up fearing he might depart the scene causing the misnomered "peace process" to collapse. Journalists jest with him and poke at him, and in the case of Larry King practically mock him with disingenuous backslapping praise.

Throughout the CNN interview King -- notoriously Israeli-oriented himself and honorary co-chairman of Israel's "Jerusalem 3000 campaign" -- made one comical put-down after another of "President Arafat". From gratuitously advising him how to deal with his wife, to trying to urge him to remove his "trademark headdress", to concluding with the greeting "shalom" and then joking how when you love the world its full of Jews, King repeatedly twisted Arafat this way and that.

To make matters even more deplorable, in response to King's use of the term "shalom", Arafat immediately started repeating in mantra-like fashion "Shabbat shalom, Shabbat shalom" -- the Hebrew greeting for "Good Sabbath". It is an expression that has nothing whatsoever to do with the circumstances Arafat was in, and in effect the whole exchange came across as a kind of parroting behavior by "the Chairman".

Arafat has become a man who increasingly seems not to understand much of what is happening around him, whether it be words like "Shalom" or the text of agreements the Israelis, with their Zionist team of American officials, constantly prepare for his signature.

How tragic to see the Palestinian people saddled with Yasser Arafat in these ways after such a long and heroic struggle -- for of course the slights to Arafat are really designed to further demoralize and disenfranchise their collective national aspirations for true self-determination and real (not pretend) independence. One day Arafat will pass (inshallah); but the human wreckage and political disasters he leaves behind may tragically endure. Indeed that is precisely why the Israelis and their American fellow-travelers are working so feverishly to get so much signed and sealed while Arafat is still around to do the dirty deeds.

In just the past couple of weeks around Washington the following exchanges about this man Arafat have been personally heard:

A ranking U.N. official whispers quietly, "He's absolutely terrible".

** A well-known Palestinian intellectual from the area, who has known Arafat for decades, leans over to confide, "Arafat MUST go!".

** A long-time Palestinian activist with impressive past credentials -- himself now practically reduced to despondency -- confides that he now feels the only thing left for him to do is picket with an anti-Arafat sign when "the Chairman" comes to town.

** An astute Muslim graduate student of international affairs sums things up simply by saying "Arafat has absolutely no dignity".

** A former high-ranking Egyptian diplomat suggests the whole Arab world, practically all of the regimes, are now "politically bankrupt".

In private, the loathing and cussing one hears about this man Arafat -- all the way from leading Palestinian personalities to former Arafat associates, to the new generation of Arab students -- is so commonplace now as to be considered nearly normal "private" conversation.

Even so, the major American media continue their tradition of themselves parroting what the politicians and the p.r. people supply them with sound-bites and press releases. Imagine, Larry King even kept repeating that under Arafat there is a "free Palestinian press"! George Orwell would understand so well!

Its been like this for some years now -- much of the American media acting more like propagandists for the powers that be rather than true sources of honest information and expert insights. On matters Middle Eastern, the American media is nearly always shallow and more often than not miserable. In this particular case of Arafat, for decades he was disparaged as a dirty terrorist, repeatedly and vociferously condemned. Then all of a sudden he became a "peacemaker" and a "Statesman" whom everyone is told to respect and admire! The major media rarely bother to seriously enter this jingoistic hall of mirrors, hardly ever attempting to honestly explain what's really going on with the post-Gulf war 11peace process." One thinks back to Jimmy Carter toasting the Shah of Iran for his wise leadership and for bringing stability to his country and region -- this just months before the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis that followed from it!

It is world-renowned intellectual Edward Said at Columbia University who has termed Arafat a "collaborator", Noam Chomsky at M.I.T who has branded him another American "client", Naseer Aruri (associated with the Palestinian Center in Washington) who has coined the word "vassal" to describe "the Chairman". To be even more fully candid, increasingly it seems Arafat is actually playing the role of Israeli/American mistress these days (true, there are less flattering terms that may apply even more fittingly ... beginning with " p " and "w").

Meanwhile, we now learn from the latest book about Arafat -- this one titled YASSER ARAFAT'S SEVEN LIVES and published in Paris by authors Christopher Boltanski, Jerusalem correspondent for France's well-known leftist LIBERATION newspaper, and Jihan Tahri, an Egyptian journalist -- that Arafat has been lying and cheating his way about everything for decades, even about his birth and his wives!

Turns out he wasn't born in Palestine after all as he has always claimed, but rather in Heliopolis, a luxurious suburb of Cairo, in 1929.

Also turns out he didn't somehow just discover women in recent years -- it was all along rather difficult to believe he was really "married to the revolution"! Over the years it now appears he has had at least one, maybe two, other wives before Suha Tawil. According to the new book Arafat wasn't going to take Suha as his official wife either, not until big-mama Raymonda weighted in that is. In his past in Lebanon there was Najla Yassim, and in Egypt Rachida Mahran. Mahran once even announced and flashed her Arafat-given wedding ring in a room full of PLO stalwarts.

Past books about Arafat were largely PLO-inspired affairs at a time when the p.r. goal was to create a hero-cult around "the Chairman." Jewish writer John Wallach and wife produced one of these glorifications a few years ago, mainly inspired by Palestinians working with Arafat as well as by Israelis preparing the way for Arafat's rebirth. This latest effort, however, seems far more independent and far closer to the truth.

Whatever, Yasser is here in America these days. It's a kind of grand pay-off actually. Essentially Arafat was told that if he was good ... if he did what he was told ... if he signed all the agreements (even while making other kinds of harsher noises when speaking in Arabic to his own people), then he would be rewarded with his own official White House visit. Of course he just couldn't resist!

In a very real sense he's come to Washington to get politically resuscitated as well as to get his "allowance" (the most generous word one can come up with under the circumstances). He's come to pretend he's head of a real government; to pretend he's a "democrat", to pretend he's a "President" -- to pretend and pretend and pretend ad infinitum. And -- with the self-serving assistance of people like Larry King -- to further pretend there's a "free Palestinian press" as well!

The deeper reality though is that Arafat has really come to pay homage to those who now own and control his every move. And the more tragic reality is that Arafat has come to get his ongoing marching orders from those who now use him to manipulate his entire people into the permanent status of collective "vassals", permanent supplicants, and the modern-day equivalent of Indians on scattered reservations.

As one astute Israeli observer has put it, "the Palestinians have paid at least as dear a price for Oslo as they did in 1948".

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