

Our own Palestinian De Gaulle

There is now a chance for peace - but not because of Arafat's death

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Throughout his political career, Yasser Arafat was the object of relentless campaigns of character assassination - not because of what he was, but because of what he represented: the Palestinian people, whose mere existence was a monumental nuisance for those who coveted Palestine. For me, Yasser Arafat was the Palestinian De Gaulle, the architect of the resurrection of our national movement in the mid-1960s, and its locomotive for almost 40 years.

He had to struggle against foes and friends to maintain the rank and status of Palestine and the Palestinians, undiminished in spite of Israeli military occupation and our dispersion. I first met Yasser Arafat at a student conference in Amman in 1970, when I was 20 and president of the Palestinian students in Belgium. I translated for him during several of his encounters. His message was: we the Palestinians are the victims of the victims of European history. We have become the Jews of the Jews. But we do not want to make them the Palestinians of the Palestinians. We are trying to break the dialectic of oppression, where the previously oppressed becomes the tormentor; hence our proposal of a democratic unitary state in Palestine that is bi-cultural, multi-confessional and multi-ethnic.

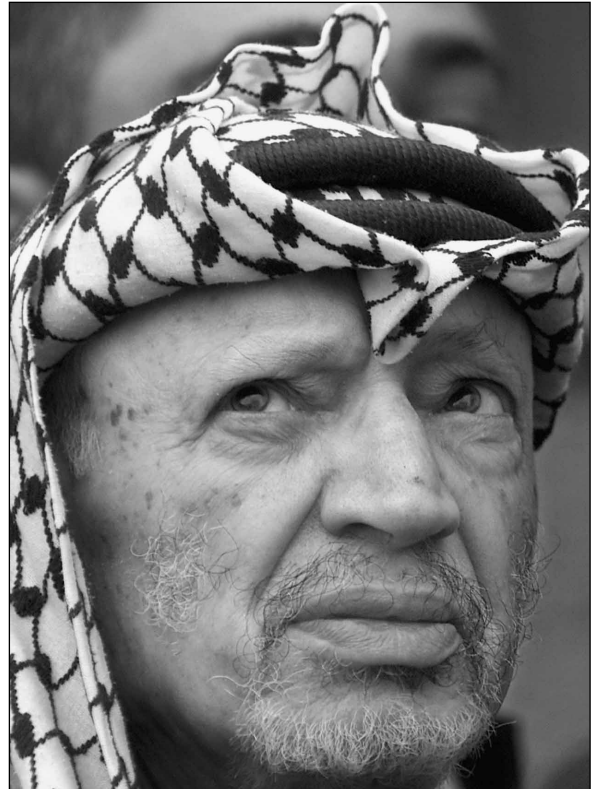
Yasser Arafat was the first to draw the strategic lessons of the October war in 1973. From then on, he believed there could be no military solution to the conflict, but only a necessary, negotiated solution: the two-state solution. After 1973, he became the leader of the pragmatic school of thought in the annual Arab summits. Throughout those years, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Palestinian people were the rejected party and Israel the rejectionist party.

During the PLO's years in Beirut, I served as a staff member in Arafat's office, in charge of UN institutions and European affairs. After the European Venice declaration of 1980, which for the first time endorsed Palestinian self-determination and the role of the PLO in any quest for peace, I attended with him meetings with successive presidents of the European council of ministers. That was the beginning of a European initiative from which he had great expectations.

Beside him, I witnessed the Israeli-Palestinian mini-war in Lebanon in August 1981, and the negotiations for a ceasefire with UN commander General Callaghan and American presidential envoy Philip Habib. Arafat respected that ceasefire scrupulously for 11 months, when General Sharon, itching for a war, violated it in June 1982 by invading Lebanon - a war that even Israeli public opinion considered not a war of necessity, but of choice. Many observers sympathetic to Israel considered that since then Israel lost its "purity of arms".

In 1980, I was asked to interview Yasser Arafat for the Catholic weekly *TÉmoignage ChrÉtien*. I wanted to finish with a human touch, so I asked him at the end: "Abu Ammar, which was your saddest day?"

He looked surprised, and he was known to be reluctant to



answer personal questions. Then, after some meditation, he answered, "I have had many a sad day in my life." So I asked him, "and which was your happiest day?" to which he answered, "My happiest day? I haven't lived it yet."

My final meeting with Yasser Arafat was on October 20, when my wife and I were among his last visitors. He had been already sick for more than a week, but worried that we might catch his flu. Yet for 25 minutes he questioned me with great precision about domestic British politics, Prime Minister Blair and what I thought were the possibilities of a British initiative after the US elections. He instructed me to liaise closely with the government because he was extremely favourable to any serious credible attempt to revitalise the peace process.

There is now a window of opportunity to reactivate the process - and not because Yasser Arafat is now out of the picture. It is for objective reasons which are now converging and which would have had his blessing.

First, now that President Bush has secured his place in the White House for a second mandate, he might also want to secure his place in history. Second, there is European and international exasperation with the self-inflicted impotence of the American administration for the last four years, which has resulted in the irresponsible deterioration in Israel-Palestine. And finally, there is a growing awareness in Washington that what is poisoning international relations and creating a rift with the Arab and Muslim worlds is the perceived American complicity with Israeli territorial appetites and the unresolved Palestinian tragedy.

Arafat, an obstacle to peace? I believe that we need an Israeli "obstacle" of a similar kind in order to make further progress in our elusive quest. ■