Yasser Arafat

Palestinian leader whose evolution from guerrilla to politician failed to improve the lot of his people

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Arafat addressing the United Nations in New York in 1974. He demonstrated an uncanny talent for survival but saw no virtue in simplicity

YASSER ARAFAT, who died yesterday aged 75, was the unchallenged leader of the Palestinian people and their movement for statehood over more than 30 years.

His Machiavellian grasp of political bargaining, an uncanny talent for personal and political survival, and an ability to work harder and sleep less than his rivals bore fruit in 1993 with an agreement with Israel that laid the shaky foundations of a Palestinian state in scraps of land prised from the grip of the occupying power.

That high point (in 1994 he was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with the Israelis Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres) was followed by a decade in which Arafat presided over a politically stagnant and corrupt administration in the West Bank and Gaza, and his people's lives declined into penury, repression and anti-Israeli violence.

By the time of his death, he had been living as a virtual prisoner in a single, windowless room in the besieged remains of his administration's compound in Ramallah, protected by a small core of loyalists, surviving on bread and olives. His only value to his people was as a symbol of stubborn resistance to Israeli domination.

From the time he emerged on to the international stage in 1968 as the spokesman for Fatah, the Palestinian independence movement which he jointly founded, he made an erratic evolution from guerrilla leader to politician, ceding the gun to the olive branch. While seeming to thrive on political flux and chaos, he was guided by two consistent principles: that the Palestinians themselves should speak for Palestinian aspirations, and that no one but he should decide how their struggle for statehood should be waged.

So completely did he dominate the politics of Palestinian nationalism from the 1960s onwards that the history of the Palestinian people and his political biography are virtually inseparable. It was a role that Arafat played to the limit: he was rarely photographed without his kaffiyeh, or Arab headscarf, which he wore carefully draped to hang down at the front in the shape of a map of Palestine.

The 1993 Oslo Agreement with Israel did little to improve the lot of ordinary Palestinian people. Arafat was willing to concede a great deal to secure Israel's recognition of his leadership and the right to establish Palestinian governance on Palestinian soil, even of the most limited kind.

Arafat represented a confluence of paradoxes: an autocrat who was in thrall to Palestinian public opinion; a loner who was surrounded by sycophants; a man impervious to material temptation who tolerated conspicuous corruption among his lieutenants. The elusiveness of his character was increased by a tendency to exaggerate and invent in matters of fact, particularly about his own life.

Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Raouf 'Arafat al-Qudua al-Husseini was born in Cairo on August 24 1929, the sixth of seven children. (He assumed the forename Yasser, after a companion of the Prophet Mohammed, in the 1940s.) His father was a respectable wholesale foodstuffs merchant of modest means who moved the family from Gaza to Cairo.

As a boy in Cairo, Arafat showed a precocious aptitude for leadership. He would organise neighbourhood boys into regiments, which he would drill in the streets and lead in demonstrations against British rule in Egypt. Too hyperactive to attend school regularly, he was fascinated by politics.

When the first Arab-Israeli war broke out in 1948, Arafat joined a unit of irregular soldiers formed by the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic fundamentalist movement based in Egypt. The unit fought with regular Egyptian forces in southern Gaza. Arafat earned a reputation as a fearless fighter at this time, though he would later greatly embellish his accounts of his own exploits.

After the Arab defeat, and the establishment of the state of Israel, Arafat enrolled at the University of Cairo as an engineering student. He became active in the militant Egyptian Students' Union, as well as in the Palestinian Students' Union, in 1952 (the year Nasser seized power in Egypt) being elected its president.

Arafat trained fellow students in guerrilla warfare and led small bands on raids inside the Israeli border. As a student activist in Cairo, Arafat met three men who were to be his closest political colleagues for more than 30 years: Khalil al-Wazir, Salah Khalaf and Faruq al-Qaddumi. This group later founded the Palestinian independence movement Fatah and formed its core leadership. In later years, as top officials of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation), they represented the only effective check on Arafat.

Arafat graduated in 1956, and immediately found a job with an Egyptian construction company. When Britain, France and Israel launched their attack on Egypt that year, he joined the Egyptian army as a lieutenant, and led a bomb-disposal squad into Port Said.

He left Egypt for Kuwait the following year, joining the Kuwait public works department as an engineer and afterwards starting a profitable construction firm. His political activities also prospered in Kuwait's more liberal atmosphere, and with his colleagues from Cairo University he founded Fatah, which was based on the principle of Palestinian political independence.

In 1963 he moved to Damascus to organise Fatah in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. More hotheaded than his colleagues, he led a faction in Fatah that was impatient to begin guerrilla attacks on Israel, and worked feverishly to organise armed groups. Attacks began in early 1965.

They were supported at first by the Syrian defence minister, Hafez al-Assad, but when Assad sought to bring Fatah more closely under Syrian control Arafat resisted. In 1966 Assad ordered Arafat's arrest, and he was jailed for a month.

After the defeat of the Arab forces in the 1967 Six Day War, Arafat entered the West Bank, basing himself at Nablus with a team of 30 men, hoping to establish guerrilla cells inside Israeli-occupied territory, and sending wildly exaggerated reports of his success back to the Fatah ruling council.

But the guerrillas were no match for the new Israeli military administration in the West Bank, which promptly rounded up hundreds of Palestinian fighters; Arafat fled to Jordan. Undeterred, he established guerrilla bases in the Palestinian refugee camps that had sprung up there.

The high point of his success as a guerrilla leader came in March 1968, when the Israeli Defence Forces launched a retaliatory attack on the Jordanian village of Karamah, where Arafat had established the core of Fatah's command network. Supported by the Jordanian army, Fatah put up a bold defence; though the Israelis won, Fatah inflicted considerable losses, and the battle was seen as a victory for them.

The world first heard of Arafat at this time. Fatah's popularity and its membership soared after Karamah, and Arafat, its hero, was named its spokesman. His bearded face, hidden by raffish black glasses, appeared on the cover of *Time*.

The next year he was elected chairman of the executive committee of the PLO, a position that also entitled him to command Palestine Liberation Army units in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The PLO had been established in 1964 by Arab governments to be a client organisation, intended to control and contain the Palestinian independence movement. Arafat's election set the PLO on a new, independent course: henceforth it was to be dominated by Fatah, and under Arafat it became the main Palestinian political vehicle.

The PLO now developed into an umbrella organisation, drawing in a variety of Palestinian factions. Holding them together in a single coalition was to be Arafat's biggest political headache for much of his career. He never seemed to be trying hard enough to rein in the excesses of his radical fringe to satisfy Israel or the West.

By 1970, Palestinian guerrillas in Jordan were undermining the stability of the Jordanian state. Their raids into Israel were causing fierce Israeli reprisals in Jordanian territory, and the guerrillas themselves were calling for the overthrow of King Hussein. The crisis reached a climax in September, when the young king launched a military campaign against the Palestinian strongholds. The Palestinians were defeated, and Arafat was forced to flee. He spent the next 12 years in Beirut, rebuilding his power base.

It became clear to Arafat by the early 1970s that a military victory over Israel was impossible, and that the only realistic way forward was to accept the existence of Israel and to use diplomacy to secure a Palestinian state in what was left of the original Palestinian territory. Bringing the Palestinian people and the PLO behind such a policy was to take many years, but would prove a major political accomplishment.

The elusive prize which Arafat ardently sought was official recognition of the PLO by the United States. He seemed close to achieving this for a moment in 1974, when he made indirect overtures to the American Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, but the scheme foundered on an outright refusal by Israel to countenance it.

The Palestinian people were disadvantaged by Arafat's unworldly misunderstanding of the United States. He naively thought that America would simply order Israel to make peace once his own personal charisma had effected the opening of relations with the PLO; but he waited another 20 years for American recognition.

Until then, Arafat devoted himself to establishing relations with any country that would allow his plane to land. He spent half his time in jets lent by sympathetic Arab governments, and was endlessly photographed embracing heads of state in remote countries whose involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict was purely theoretical.

A milestone on the path to the diplomatic acceptance of the PLO was reached in October 1974, when the Rabat conference of Arab heads of state recognised the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". The following month, the PLO was granted observer status at the United Nations.

He spent the next eight years leading the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon in a desperate struggle for survival in that country's complex civil war. As the commander of Fatah forces, he joined forces with the charismatic Druse warlord Kamal Jumblatt, a fatal alliance which set the Palestinians in confrontation with the armed forces of Syria. The price was paid by the Palestinian refugees themselves, thousands of whom died in a Syrian siege of Palestinian refugee camps.

At the height of the war, Arafat led Palestinian forces against an Israeli siege lasting 88 days. After thousands of Palestinian deaths, Fatah's military forces were finally defeated in August 1982, and Arafat and his fighters were forced to evacuate Beirut. He and the PLO elite were offered refuge in Tunisia.

Arafat experienced the lowest point of his political fortunes in the mid-1980s. In October 1985, in retaliation for an attack on an Israeli-owned yacht, six Israeli F-15 fighter bombers swooped over PLO headquarters in Tunis, reducing the buildings to rubble, and killing 73 people. Arafat was in one of his safe houses and was unharmed, though he assumed he was the raid's target.

In December 1987 a popular Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule broke out in the impoverished Gaza Strip and quickly spread to the West Bank. The outbreak of the intifada (as it came to be known) caught Arafat by surprise, but he moved quickly to impose the authority of the PLO over it, and to harness the worldwide sympathy it generated to push for diplomatic recognition by the United States.

In November 1988 he persuaded the Palestinian National Congress, the Palestinian parliament in exile, to support his plan for statehood alongside Israel. He then announced the PLO's acceptance of Israel's existence at a special session of the UN General Assembly in Geneva. The immediate result of his speech was an American decision to open a "substantive dialogue" with the PLO.

But his success was short-lived. Within a few months, America abruptly ended talks after Arafat failed to denounce a seaborne terrorist attack on the Israeli coast by the Palestine Liberation Front, a radical group affiliated to the PLO.

When the Gulf war broke out in 1990, Arafat felt compelled by Palestinian public opinion in the Occupied Territories to take the side of Saddam Hussein, who had made an unconvincing promise to evacuate Kuwait if Israel would withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza. After Iraq's defeat, the Palestinians reaped disastrous consequences when the entire Palestinian population (about 300,000 people) was expelled from Kuwait, and oil-rich states of the Gulf stopped funding the PLO.

In 1991 the United States invited Jordan and Israel to take part in peace talks in Madrid, on condition that the Palestinians involved were not members of the PLO. Arafat's response was cunningly pragmatic: he countenanced the creation of a delegation of West Bank notables who reported to him on an almost daily basis. It was an open secret that Israel was now, for the first time, negotiating with Arafat.

Never one to see much virtue in simplicity, Arafat authorised the opening of a second, secret channel of negotiations with Israel while the Washington-sponsored talks were still under way. In the end, it was these talks, held in Oslo under the auspices of the Norwegian government, that produced the breakthrough. At the end of August 1993 the Israeli cabinet approved the Oslo plan, which provided for the establishment of Palestinian local government in Gaza and a tiny enclave around the isolated oasis town of Jericho. On September 13, President Clinton oversaw the signature of the agreement between Israel and the PLO at a ceremony on the White House lawn. Arafat shook hands with the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

In conducting the Oslo negotiations, Arafat was interested above all in acquiring the symbols of statehood (uniformed guards at the borders, his own face on the new Palestinian Authority postage stamps) and securing Israel's recognition of the PLO. He paid little attention to the details of the later agreements that continued the Oslo process. Palestinians found themselves living under a tighter regime than ever before, and still humiliatingly subordinate to Israel.

Arafat was elected President of the Palestinian Authority in 1996, at the same time as the establishment of a legislature that he eventually neutralised. Building civil society in the Palestinian areas was of less importance to him than making himself indispensable. This meant retarding the growth of Palestinian institutions by turning them into his own personal instruments, and prizing loyalty above competence, or even honesty, in his deputies.

Although Arafat was regarded by Americans, Israelis and foreign aid donors as unreliable, for the Palestinians life without him was unthinkable, even when opinion polls showed little support for his policies. His position as Palestinian leader included the traditional role of arbitrating among local families in disputes over land, marriages and property, and his shrewd ability to hold together a wide consensus in Palestinian society never faltered when the radical Islamist movement Hamas became a rival force in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1990s.

He gave the Hamas leader Sheikh Yasin a Mercedes Benz as a gift in 1997 on his release from an Israeli prison, but arrested dozens of his followers in the months that followed. By 2000, the promise of the Oslo Agreement had all but withered, and Arafat's position in negotiations with Israel hardened. At a summit with Israel and America at Camp David in July, Arafat refused to make concessions on the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their former homeland, and on Jerusalem as the possible capital of a Palestinian state.

Clinton blamed Arafat for the failure of the negotiations. At Camp David, Arafat rejected the offer of a larger area of land than the Palestinians had ever been offered until then, a stand that he later acknowledged was a mistake. When a new uprising broke out later that year, more violent than the original intifada, he did little to discourage his police and security units from engaging in gun battles with the Israeli military forces that were sent into Palestinian areas to suppress it.

The first American administration of George W Bush ceased to take an active role in brokering an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. It supported the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's policy of demanding the impossible of Arafat – that he restrain the radical Palestinian Islamist forces that had seized the initiative in the violent struggle against Israel, while insisting at the same time that he was a political irrelevance.

In 2002 Israeli forces besieged a Palestinian Authority compound in Ramallah in which Arafat was living; he remained confined there for the next two and a half years. As his health and political effectiveness declined, he made belated attempts to reform his administration, and to find a way out of the impasse. Last year he bowed to American pressure and appointed a prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas; he resigned after three months, frustrated in his attempts to challenge Arafat's autocratic control, but is now general secretary of the PLO.

In 1990, Yasser Arafat married, in conditions of great secrecy, 26-year-old Suha al-Tawil, a Palestinian Christian who converted to Islam on marriage, and who spent much of her time thereafter in Paris. They had a daughter, Zahwa.

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