

Did Palestinians Poison Yasser Arafat?

In his musical-comedy film, *The Court Jester*, Danny Kaye amused us with the tongue twisting line, "the pellet with the poison is in the vessel with the pestle."

The long-running non-musical Palestinian theater of the absurd about who employed the poison that killed Yasser Arafat and how it was done is not as amusing but it is nearing its resolution.

The Palestinian comedy appears to have ended with the decision on April 30, 2015 of French investigating judges that there was no foul play in the death of Arafat, the PLO leader, who died aged 75 on November 11, 2004 at the Percy de Clamart hospital near Paris. They concluded there was no evidence he had ingested Polonium-210 before his symptoms of stomach pains that occurred while he was living in Ramallah. The judges reported to the French prosecutor, who now must make a final decision, that Arafat's death was not the result of poisoning.

Yasser Arafat had deliberately started the Second Intifada in September 2000. Four years later he fell ill and was rushed to the French military hospital in the suburbs of Paris. Though there were multiple rumors of the cause of death, including cancer, cirrhosis, and AIDs, the official French statement was different. It was that he died of a stroke caused by a blood disorder as a result of a number of diseases on November 11, 2004. No obvious traces of poison were found. Suha Arafat, the PLO leader's widow, refused to have an autopsy done at the time of his death, and therefore conspiracies flourished.

For many years Palestinian conspiracy theories held that Israeli Jews in some way had killed Arafat. The Palestinian

Authority Minister of Religious Affairs, Al-Habbash, on November 8, 2013 drew on history and preached that Arafat was killed in the same way as the Prophet Muhammad. He knew that the Prophet had been given poisoned meat by Jews in the town of Khaibar, and died of it three years later. Similarly, though Habbash did not mention the mechanism had been meat, he declared that Arafat had been killed by Jews in the same way as the Prophet had been. Arafat had become a martyr.

The drama about Arafat's death began in July 2012 when al-Jazeera television incorrectly, probably deliberately, reported a version of an article in *The Lancet*. That article was written by scientists associated with the Institute for Radiation Physics in Lausanne, Switzerland on the general subject of the detection of polonium poisoning. The Institute happened to include the laboratory that had initially tested some of Arafat's clothing.

Al-Jazeera then reported that *The Lancet* article had supported the possibility that Arafat was poisoned with the radioactive element polonium-210. This inaccurate statement was based on the fact that the Swiss scientists had merely examined Arafat's effects and found "abnormal levels of polonium." The Arab League secretary-general, Nabil al-Araby, who had been less interested in probing the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, raised Arafat's case in the UN Security Council.

As a consequence, Suha Arafat lodged a complaint at a court in Nanterre in 2012. She agreed to Arafat's body being exhumed from its grave in Ramallah in November 2012. Samples from the body were tested by teams of French, Swiss, and Russian investigators for traces of polonium. The result was disappointing for the Palestinians who were obliged to state that the al-Jazeera story had revealed nothing new.

Unfortunately for the gullible or the malicious, evidence by a number of international experts had disproved the allegations

of foul deeds. French pathologists had concluded that there was absolutely no way the symptoms described in Arafat's medical report matched those of poisoning by polonium. They found that the polonium-210 and lead -210 found in Arafat's grave and in the samples were of an environmental nature. Scientists tell us that polonium occurs naturally in small amounts in the crust of the earth, and that very small portions may be in human beings. Scientists have made it clear that hundreds of people around the world have been subjected to various levels of contamination.

Toxicologist tests by Russians show that Arafat could not have died of polonium poisoning. Vladimir Uiba, head of Russia's Federal Medical and Biological Agency (FMBA) said that no traces of the substance had been found, and that Arafat had died of natural causes. His agency did not plan any further tests. Similarly, a respected and objective scientist, former head of the biological research unit of the Atomic Energy Authority in Britain, pointed out that it was scientifically unjustified to calculate how much polonium was in Arafat's body on the basis of "such tiny concentrations of polonium."

The symptoms in the case of Arafat were quite different from those present in the famous case of the Russian dissident and former spy Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned with a strong dose of polonium slipped into his tea in a restaurant in London in 2006. Almost certainly, the KGB had poisoned him.

The Palestinian Fatah organization has not been willing to end the comedy. Tawfik Tirawi, member of the Fatah Central Committee and head of the PLO commission of inquiry into the death of Arafat, revealed a request made to him by French authorities before the report of the French judges had been presented. He said that France had asked that the PLO not impose the death sentence or execute the killer of Arafat, but that he refused to make any such pledge.

Tirawi had previously said that the PLO was certain that

“there are Palestinian hands that contributed to the elimination of Yasser Arafat.” Ominously, those responsible were doomed to death. Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian President, in the tenth year of his four-year term, has been more pointed. He accused his political rival, Mohammed Dahlan, now safely in exile, of involvement in Arafat’s death.

Suha Arafat is more likely to accept the conclusions of the French authorities. She can now relax and continue to enjoy the luxurious life she has been having. She had confessed that her marriage at the age of 27 to Yasser who was 61 was a “big mistake,” that she regretted it, and she had tried to leave him on many occasions. It remains unclear how many millions of dollars were in Yasser’s bank accounts around the world, including the Leumi Bank in Tel Aviv, and where the money has gone. Forbes Magazine estimated Arafat’s assets at \$200 million, and the CIA estimate was \$6 billion. Nevertheless whatever the real amount, Suha seems content living in Paris and in Malta with the \$100,000 a month she is receiving from the Palestinian budget. Unlike some American politicians, she does not have to work to pay her bills.

First published in the