

Why Honor Yasser Arafat?

by Michael Curtis

We can never know the whole truth, but we do know some of it. We know for sure that Barack Hussein Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on August 4, 1961. We know that, although *New York Times* reporter Nate Cohen confessed in his paper he had “fudged” projection numbers of the outcome of the November 8, 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump still won. We know, though she might change her mind, that the actress Cher is packing her bags “to leave the planet” because of Trump’s victory.

However, for some commentators there is still some confusion or refusal to admit essential information about the late Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, President of the Palestine Authority, and leader of the Fatah party, known popularly as Abu Ammar. Some still dispute where Yasser Arafat was born; controversy still reigns over the causes of his death in a Paris military hospital on November 11, 2004; and the extent of his personal wealth remains unclear.

By coincidence, on the fifteenth anniversary of his death, the Arafat Museum was opened on the grounds of the Palestinian presidential headquarter in Ramallah. Covering two floors the Museum includes 10,000 pictures of the Palestinian leader, a mock up of Arafat’s modest last room as it used to be with a single bed and small wardrobe, the sunglasses he wore at his UN address in 1974, his keffiyehs (scarves), his pistol, passport, and Nobel Peace Prize medal awarded in 1994 to himself, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

The Museum was fortunate to have some items. That Nobel Prize medal was found in a market in Gaza. When it took power in 2007 the Hamas group, rival of Fatah, looted Arafat’s

headquarters in Gaza City and took nearly everything including almost all his fake uniforms and also his wife's clothes and Christian Louboutin expensive shoes. That is why only 4 uniforms were left to display in the museum.

The Museum purports to display, through portaying the memorabilia of Arafat's life, and featuring his story in the West Bank, in Tunisia, and in Lebanon, the most important events in Palestinian history, though its value as an cultural, educational, and objective commemorative institution is limited. Its presentation of Yasser Arafat is as enigmatic as the man himself, variously regarded as a freedom fighter or terrorist leader, and who in 1974 came to the UN with an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun.

First. there is the dispute over his place of birth. Palestinian activists, and the Museum fudges the issue, maintained for a long that Arafat was born and raised in Jerusalem. In fact he was born in Cairo, Egypt on August 24, 1929, where he was raised. His father who worked in Cairo was a Palestinian from Gaza City, and his mother was Egyptian. Arafat's mother came from a Jerusalem based family. Arafat was always an Arab nationalist, but was he a true Palestinian?

Even more controversy surrounds the reason for his death. Though the French doctors at the hospital where he died said he died from a stroke, a blood condition, other versions have been given. Russian scientists investigating the death said there was no trace of radioactive poisoning, yet PLO leaders suggest polonium, or use of an Israeli laser, or poisoning by rival Palestinian personalities. One of them Ahmad Jibril of the PFLP, General Command asserted that Arafat had died of AIDS.

Much of this problem stems from the fact that Arafat's wife Suha refused to allow an autopsy. She is not perhaps a credible witness. She, originally a Catholic, regretted her marriage and tried to divorce him on many occasions. Suha,

with dyed blonde hair, love of designer clothes and shoes, and leading a high profile life in Paris, was rumored to have had separate quarters at home, and to have led separate lives.

The new Museum does not deal with Suha's life after Yasser. The PLO supposedly gave her \$22 million a year to live on out of Yasser's secret accounts. She is said to be living, first at the Bristol Hotel in Paris and then elsewhere, on a monthly allowance of over \$100,000, perhaps \$200,000, a month. She is also rumored to have given necklaces and earrings to Hillary Clinton.

The image of the dedicated revolutionary living ascetically is dispelled by the reality. The large amounts of money come from the secretive assets of Yasser, about which considerable speculation has taken place. *Forbes Magazine* estimated the fortune at over \$300 million. A report by a U.S. accounting firm headed by the auditor Jim Prince told of a secret portfolio of \$1 billion, with holdings in Coca Cola, Tunisian cell phone company, venture capital firms in the US and the Cayman islands. The CIA put the sum even higher at \$6 billion. Ironically, for a time Yasser's associates used the Leumi Bank in Tel Aviv to launder money, which then went to Lombard Odier in Geneva, Switzerland. Some of the money came from Saddam Hussein who gave Yasser \$500 million for his support in the first Gulf war, the invasion of Kuwait.

Which aspects of Arafat's life is the Museum likely to feature? Will it shed light on any desire for peace with Israel, the belated acceptance of UNGA Resolution 242, the participation in the 1983 Oslo Accords and the 2000 Camp David Summit?

Or will it outline his responsibility for terrorism. From 1969 he made clear the need for the PLO to carry on intense armed revolution in all parts of Palestinian territory, to engage in a war of liberation. He was briefed on Palestinian air hijackings, and on the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre of 11

Israelis. He was responsible for inaugurating the two Intifadas, in December 1987 and in 2000.

It is an ominous sign that the Museum prominently displays his submachine gun, assault rifle, and pistol. This will not encourage Palestinians to live in peace with Israel.