

After Arafat, Muslims, Jews assess prospects: Hopes for a more peaceful future

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American Jews and Muslims reflect differently on the life and leadership of Yasir Arafat, but they agree that, following his death, a new era of leadership is needed to unify Palestinians and reinvigorate the peace process.

Arafat died in Paris November 11 at age 75. For nearly two weeks, he lay in a coma amid conflicting reports on his condition, a week after he collapsed at his Palestinian compound in Ramallah and was flown to France for treatment.

For many U.S. Muslims, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian National Authority was the pioneer and icon of his people's self-determination and independence during years of struggle and violence between Palestinians and Israelis. For American Jews, he represented violent opposition to Israel's very existence, as well as broken promises of peace.

"Nobody can deny that Arafat was an icon and a symbol of the Palestinian struggle," said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Washington-based civil liberties group.

American Jewish leaders often cast Arafat's political life as a tragedy. "For us he symbolized an unwillingness to recognize the reality of Israel and the need for Israelis and Palestinians to live together in peace, with tragic consequences for all concerned," said Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism.

Orthodox Jewish leaders put it more strongly. "We are thankful to God that an obstacle to peace and a proven murderer is no longer with us," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for the Orthodox umbrella body Agudath Israel of America.

Leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization since 1969 and the Palestinian National Authority since 1996, Arafat was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994

along with then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. After Rabin's assassination, however, the peace process collapsed and was never significantly revived.

American Muslims hope a more peaceful future is possible. "[Arafat at death] was still considered a figurehead, and what Palestinians need today is more than a figurehead, they need a taskmaster, they need an administrator, they need someone who can work quickly and effectively with respect to the challenges facing modern Palestinians today," said Salam Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles.

Al-Marayati said that the best antidote to violence and terrorism would be a democratically elected Palestinian leader, something that he says would help the Bush administration's broader goal of advancing democracy in the Middle East.

With the U.S. likely to continue as a broker of any peace accord, political scientist Muqtedar Khan of Michigan's Adrian College said Arafat's replacement would have to have international credibility even while trying to bring together militant factions of the Palestinian movement, including Hamas, and more moderate Palestinians. "Israel cannot make peace with a part of the Palestinians, they have to make peace with all of the Palestinians," said Kahn, who is also a nonresident fellow at Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, Christian leaders expressed sorrow at the death of Arafat, noting that he had been a friend to Palestinian Christians.

"He succeeded in the recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people so today everyone—all the governments, even Israel—is convinced that one day a Palestinian state must be created for the Palestinian people," said Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the first Palestinian to head the Catholic Church in the Holy Land. Sabbah said Arafat, who had attended Christmas services at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, also took political measures to raise the status of the dwindling number of Christians in Palestine.

Said Anglican Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal from St. George's Cathedral in East Jerusalem: "We as members of the Christian community feel the same loss if not more because of his real concern for the Palestinian Christians, institutions and holy places."

Arafat will be remembered not only as a supporter of Palestinian Christians but also as a freedom fighter and an obstacle to peace, said Lutheran World Federation

President Mark Hanson and General Secretary Ishmael Noko in a joint statement. They urged the U.S., the United Nations, the European Union and Russia to resume their efforts toward resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*