

After Arafat: Down this road before

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

On January 9, 2005, the Palestinians will elect a new leader. Is there any reason to believe that this will lead to a positive result for the Palestinians? Judge for yourself on the basis of recent history. Yasir Arafat is the only modern leader the Palestinians have known. He gave them world recognition and placed onto the world stage their plight as refugees and as a population under occupation.

But Arafat's methods were often self-defeating, making the name "Palestinian" synonymous with "terrorist" until Osama bin Laden took that title away. Even when he was young, the leader was known among Palestinians as "the old man."

"The old man" was a clumsy politician. Arafat was at his political peak in 1990 when he made a serious political mistake: he backed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, a miscalculation that cost him political influence, international prestige and brought a halt in funding from the Middle East and Europe. With the Soviet Union dismantled, Arafat cast his lot with Hussein at the precise moment when the U.S. emerged as the only empire left standing.

With Arafat weakened, the time was right for President George Bush's Secretary of State James Baker to invite Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians to meet with U.S. and Russian representatives in Madrid to talk about peace. Israel agreed to come, comfortable in its belief that its American friends would guarantee a favorable outcome.

The talks broke into smaller multilateral groups bound by ground rules established by the U.S. and Russia (and strongly influenced by Israel)—rules that made sure the talks did not include such "final status" issues as the future of Jerusalem, statehood, final borders, sovereignty, settlements, water, and the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

Arafat was not at the talks. He was still in exile in Tunisia, probably still trying to figure out what possessed him to support Hussein. The Palestinian delegation at Madrid and later Washington was led by Haidar Abdel Shafi, a respected medical

doctor from a prominent Gaza family, with American-educated Hannah Ashrawi from Ramallah as the Palestinian spokesperson. The other delegation members included some younger Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, professionals who understood the legal language and machinations involved in the negotiations.

The U.S. had promised to be an “honest broker” in the talks, but the promise was soon broken. The Palestinians quickly became aware that they, a stateless people, had no champion in either of the two military giants at the negotiating table. As Columbia University’s Rashid Khalidi writes in *Resurrecting Empire*, Shafi said that “it was a grievous mistake for the Palestinians to continue to negotiate under such onerous conditions, when the unceasing expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and the building of roads to connect them continued devouring the very land that was supposed to be subject to negotiation.”

The United States had agreed to oppose any actions that were “prejudicial” and would make negotiations more difficult, which meant that the U.S. would oppose continued Israeli settlement and road building. Throughout the Madrid talks, however, the U.S. representatives said nothing about the violations.

Shafi and his delegation agreed that they should withdraw from the talks until the violations ceased. But according to Khalidi, then a professor at the University of Chicago and an adviser to the Palestinians, the delegation was overruled by Arafat and the rest of the PLO leadership in Tunis.

Arafat, who had not set foot in the occupied territories since childhood, wanted a state—one with a flag and a future. But he had been in exile for too long. He had a goal, but little understanding of the process—or the people and the terrain of the country he wanted to rule. The Israelis realized that they could do business with this kind of leader.

Using secret back channels to Norwegian diplomats, the Israelis suddenly arranged for new talks in Oslo. I was in Jerusalem at the time, and I remember talking to the wife of one of those diplomats. She told me, with a smile, that she was in town to do some research.

Arafat and his fellow exiles were invited to Oslo, but the Madrid delegation was left behind in Washington. There was no room in Oslo for well-informed West Bankers and Gazans like Shafi and Ashrawi. The Oslo meetings led to the famous handshakes on the White House lawn between Arafat, Rabin and Clinton. The world cheered, but

the Palestinians knew better. What they got was an Israeli-controlled Gaza-Jericho entity with Arafat as head of the Palestinian Authority, sent there to serve as a “new sheriff in town” who could, as the Israelis said at the time, “control his own people.”

When, after a few years of poor leadership, it became clear that he could not control his own people, Arafat was ousted by the Israelis as Palestine’s leader and imprisoned in a few rooms in a battered compound in Ramallah.

Now there is to be an election. The leading candidate, Mahmoud Abbas, also spent time in exile in Tunisia. He is in good standing with the Israelis. His strongest opposition could be Marwan Barghouti, 45, a hero to younger voters but not in good standing with the Israelis, who hold him in one of their prisons. If Abbas wins, and keeps his people “under control,” don’t expect widespread rejoicing in Palestine. They have been down this road before.