

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

After Arafat ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Like most Americans of my generation I got the general impression growing up that 'terrorist' was an adjective most commonly used to modify 'Palestinian'. Visiting Jordan for the first time, in 1985, I flattered myself that I was doing something dangerous and exotic (I was wrong). Like a lot of Americans of my acquaintance I only really began to learn better once I moved over here.

Six years after that first trip to Jordan I found myself in Algiers covering a meeting of the Palestine National Council, the PLO's parliament-in-exile, for ABC Radio News. By then I considered myself, at 27, an old Middle East hand (wrong again). One day I spent half an hour in a sweltering phone booth doing what radio people call "two-ways", brief interviews with affiliate stations. During one I was asked if I didn't feel scared being, as I was, an American at what amounted to a "terrorist convention". I groaned, protesting that, really, Algiers was a pretty safe place (this was 1991, and that was still true) and in a meeting hall filled with Palestinian worthies an American reporter had nothing to fear.

I thought of all this driving through Amman today, looking at the flags flying at half-staff. Over coffee, however, a Jordanian friend opined that the only reason school was cancelled today was that having offered the same gesture when Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi died last week the government would have looked churlish if it did not do the same for Arafat.

I remarked that Arafat, whatever his failings, deserved credit for keeping the Palestinian cause on the world's agenda. Yes, this was sometimes done through terrorism. But without him where would the Palestinians be? They would be the Kurds (who, by the way, are more numerous than Palestinians). They would be the Armenians, the Ughirs, the Nuba.

My friend protested that the Palestinians had the other Arab governments. There is some truth in that, but it is also a truism of the modern Middle East that the Arab governments talk a lot about helping the Palestinians but have a distinctly mixed record of follow-through. Nasser created the PLO so that he could control Palestinian nationalism and channel it to his own purposes. Arafat, whatever one may think of him, made the organization an independent force – one that required the rest of the Arab world to keep the Palestinians on the international community's agenda.

My Jordanian friend disagreed strongly. Arafat, she said, was terrible for the Palestinians. Under his leadership intellectuals were marginalized and cronies rose to political power in place of the best and the brightest. Arafat's Palestinian authority, which could have been an example of enlightenment and democratization to the rest of the Arab world turned into just another repressive Arab regime.

Clever readers will have noticed that my friend's analysis and mine are not, in fact, mutually

exclusive. Arafat's legacy is surely mixed. The challenge for the Palestinian leaders left behind will be to cope with that as they move forward.

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