

# YASIR ARAFAT

## A Political Biography



Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin

with a new preface and afterword by the authors

BARRY RUBIN | JUDITH COLP RUBIN

# YASIR ARAFAT

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A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

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Writing a biography of anyone is a challenging task, but narrating and analyzing Yasir Arafat's life is a particularly daunting one. Yasir Arafat occupied the international spotlight for longer than almost any other politician on the planet. Yet he nevertheless remains largely an unknown person. The most basic facts about his background, thoughts, and activities are disputed or unclear. Few leaders evoke such passionate and opposing emotions.

He succeeded at creating and remaining the leader of the globe's longest-running revolutionary movement. Yet he failed to bring the struggle to a successful conclusion.

He led his people into more disasters and defeats than any counterpart—no politician in modern history can compare with him in the number of dramatic career ups-and-downs—yet he remained in power, his role as the movement's symbol and leader relatively unchallenged.

From the time he founded his own political group, Fatah, at age 36 in 1965 and for decades thereafter, Arafat could choose his historical reputation and his people's fate to a far greater extent than almost any other human being of his time. In his behavior and personality, Arafat was unique among all the world's political leaders. He played by a different set of rules from the others and, as a result, was often misunderstood. Many powerful rulers of states, leading intellectuals, and respected journalists simply could not believe he was acting in the way

he did, understand the meaning of his behavior, or respond appropriately to his behavior.

Arafat posed as the perpetual underdog yet was the recipient of many privileges. He was immune from the harsh and irreversible penalties levied on leaders who failed to use acceptable methods in pursuing their goals or on those leaders who were disgraced because they repeatedly suffered total defeat. And while his claims of importance on the Middle East stage could seem ridiculously inflated for someone who led such a relatively tiny group, insignificant in its economic or military power, he constantly had an enormously disproportionate effect on regional and even world events.

In short, Arafat has been one of the most important, influential, and paradoxical political figures in the twentieth century's second half and beyond. Despite the millions of words spoken by him and written about him, the Arafat phenomenon remains elusive.

Indeed, until Arafat was put to the test, the controversy over how to understand him could not be resolved. Only when he was offered a Palestinian state on generally reasonable terms would it be possible to conclude whether Arafat was capable of making peace. Would he achieve statehood at last, or had his recurring miscalculations blocked his people's aspirations for decades, actually intensifying their suffering along with that of so many others? Was he capable of peaceful compromise or was his only goal total victory? Would Arafat go down in history as a destructive terrorist buffoon or as a patriotic, even heroic, national liberation fighter and statesman? Or might his actual career be less important in determining history's verdict than his brilliance at public relations and media manipulation?

This book is the product of decades of study. It is based on a large number of interviews—many of them off the record at the request of those involved—archival sources never before cited, and printed materials in several languages. We have sought to present a realistic picture which has focused not on the political debates surrounding Arafat but on a genuine effort to understand this unique individual.

Many of those we spoke with—including veteran Arafat watchers and even those who have worked closely with him—admitted that after many years they still found Arafat to be a mystery. At the end of interviews, the people we were questioning often said they looked forward to reading this book in order to gain a better understanding of this individual who had played a central role in the lives of themselves, their nations, and the world. We hope this book fulfills their expectations.

It should be absolutely clear that this is a biography of Yasir Arafat and thus focuses on him personally. The book is not intended to be a history of the Middle East, of the Arab-Israeli conflict, of Israel, or of

any other person, institution, or country. The emphasis is kept on Arafat and his thoughts or activities along with those events that most affected him. If certain matters are either not discussed or presented adequately, these things are thoroughly explored in many other books and articles. Exclusion of such matters here is only due to the book's main subject and not for any other reason.

We wish to thank our editor Dedi Felman who has been an absolute joy to work with at all times. We also benefited from the assistance of researchers Cameron Brown, and Caroline Taillander, and also Joy Pincus and Amir Ram. Many others also helped by sending us useful material, including Donald Altschiller and Josh Pollack.

Regarding transliteration, we have used a system that is consistent but is also kept simple for the general audience and designed to keep familiar spellings of well-known names whenever possible.

November 22, 2004

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