

## The final days of Yasser Arafat

By Avi Isacharoff and [Amos Harel](#)

Israeli experts who analyzed the report drawn up by the medical team that treated Yasser Arafat in Paris say that the most likely possibility is that he was poisoned in a dinner meal on October 12, 2004. Arafat's personal physician insists that a test that was done on him in the French hospital whose results were removed from the post-mortem report found AIDS in his blood. In the revised edition of their book 'The Seventh War,' Avi Isacharoff and Amos Harel make public Arafat's post-mortem report, the Palestinian Authority's most closely guarded document, and reconstruct the last days of the Rais the rapid deterioration, the loss of memory, the fits of rage, Suha's takeover, the humiliation of senior Palestinian figures, the shouting at Jacques Chirac and the suspicious red blotches on the chairman's face.

"I know that the physicians in Paris found the AIDS virus in Arafat's blood," Dr. Ashraf al-Kurdi, the personal physician of the late Palestinian Authority chairman, says in a telephone interview from Amman. Dr. al-Kurdi, who was kept from joining the Palestinian delegation that accompanied Arafat on his final trip to Paris, does not say where he got this sensational information. To heighten the mystery, he also maintains that Arafat was poisoned and that the AIDS virus that was found in his blood "was injected into his body in order to camouflage the poisoning."

Strange as it may seem, al-Kurdi is not the only one who says that Arafat was infected with AIDS. Similar allegations are made by an Israeli physician, who was told about it by a French colleague who treated Arafat, and by sources in the Israeli defense establishment. Even though some of the symptoms of the mysterious disease that caused Arafat's death 10 months ago resemble those of AIDS, the detailed report prepared by the French medical team makes no mention of any test that would confirm or rule out the existence of the virus in his blood. Prof. Gil Lugassi, president of the Israeli Society of Hematology, who read the French medical report, says that the fact that this possibility was ignored is "simply inconceivable and very bizarre." "I can only assume," he says, "that if there had been an AIDS test with negative results, there would have been no problem saying so in the report."

On the other hand, senior figures in the Palestinian Authority (PA) are convinced that Israel is behind the mysterious death. They, too, cite weighty grounds. They all remember vividly the militant declarations of the Israeli leadership about the need to remove Arafat from power. Nor have they forgotten Israel's attempted assassination of a senior Hamas official, Khaled Meshal, in Amman, with the use of a mysterious poison that was unknown to Jordan's top physicians. An official commission of inquiry appointed by the PA to investigate Arafat's death has held up the publication of its conclusions for months.

In the new edition of their book "The Seventh War," which deals with the five-year confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians that began in September 2000, the journalists Avi Isacharoff (Israel Radio) and Amos Harel (Haaretz) devote a chapter to a detailed probe of the last weeks of Arafat's life. They make public for the first time the main points of the report drawn up by the medical team of Percy military hospital, in the Paris suburb of Clamart, where Arafat was treated in the last two

weeks of his life. The French physicians do not think that Arafat was poisoned, but also refrain from adducing an alternative cause of death. "It is not possible to determine a cause that will explain the combination of symptoms that caused the patient's death," the summarizing report of the hospital's intensive care ward states.

An abridged version of the chapter on Arafat's death which includes, together with details of the medical report and the claims that the AIDS virus was found in his blood, a description of the struggles for control and succession that took place behind the scenes in the PA as Arafat lay dying is published here for the first time. (The revised edition of "The Seventh War" will be published at the end of this month by Yedioth Ahronoth in Hebrew.)

### **Who is Beilin?**

The first indications of a serious deterioration in the health of Yasser Arafat appeared on Tuesday, October 12, 2004. The chairman's physicians diagnosed a disease of the digestive tract. Long before that, Arafat had suffered from a variety of illnesses and ailments: a hemorrhage in the skull as the result of a plane crash, vitiligo (a skin disease), general trembling (which was treated with drugs in the last decade of his life), and a persistent stomach inflammation which he first contracted in October 2003.

In the last year of his life, Arafat's ailments became more acute and affected his mental state. "He was diagnosed with an ulcer and with gallstones. The Rais (leader) collapsed several times, suffered from general weakness, and his state of mind was subject to ups and downs," one of his confidants relates. "He felt that the siege around him was tightening and that the world was losing interest in him. It seemed as though everyone had forgotten him."

Arafat tended not to believe those around him, often with good reason. "He asked for explanations concerning every document that reached his bureau, and when people commented on his excitability he grew angry, his whole body trembled, and he shouted, "Ana ma'akur' [I'm in a bad way.]"

In addition to the mental deterioration and the physical weakness, Arafat sometimes also suffered from partial memory loss. He spent hours upon hours reading while sitting on the bridge of the besieged Muqata his Ramallah headquarters the only place he was able to enjoy the sun's rays. On one occasion, when he came across a report that mentioned an old acquaintance, Yossi Beilin, the leader of Meretz, Arafat stunned his escorts by asking, "Who is Beilin?"

This state of affairs reached a peak when he asked someone what his daughter's name was. "Abu Amar [Arafat] changed," says a confidant of the Palestinian leader. "About two months before his collapse, the Rais already needed help in tying his shoes and in walking. He looked broken." However, when Palestinian delegations arrived to visit him, he seemed to become a different person. "He embraced and kissed everyone who came to see him. He was in excellent spirits and was delighted with every present he received."

Arafat gulped down medicines that people brought him but told his aides they were vitamins his physicians had prescribed. When the aides asked the physicians, they

were told that they had not given the Rais any new prescriptions. "I asked him why he was taking those medicines and he waved me off with the reply, "Leave it to God."

On that particular Tuesday, after dinner, the people in the Muqata noticed that Arafat was having trouble standing up unaided. He complained of nausea and vomiting. The Egyptian consul general to the PA, Nader al-A'asser, asked Arafat to let him organize a delegation of physicians from Egypt. Arafat agreed. The next day, October 13, he underwent comprehensive tests. The Egyptian team said that Arafat had the flu and returned to Cairo. For no clear reason, no one bothered to inform Arafat's personal physician, Dr. Ashraf al-Kurdi, about the worsening of the chairman's health. "I do not know why," al-Kurdi says. "In the past they summoned me for every minor flu that Abu Amar suffered from."

On October 18, the president of Tunisia, Zine El-Abadine Ben Ali, sent a medical delegation of his own to the Muqata. The Tunisian team diagnosed for the first time that Arafat had thrombocytopenia (a decrease in the number of platelets in the blood, often associated with hemorrhagic conditions). The cause of this development was not clear; the physicians recommended that Arafat enter the hospital in Ramallah for treatment and monitoring. They explained to Arafat's advisers that the makeshift treatment room in the Muqata, with its elementary medical instruments, was insufficient. Arafat, who had declined similar recommendations during the previous year, for fear that Israel would not allow him to return to his headquarters, did not reject the idea outright this time.

The Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), visited Arafat every day after he was diagnosed with "flu." In their talks, Arafat was updated about events in the PA and in the international arena. Despite his weariness, Arafat showed considerable interest in the developments. Abu Ala's impression was that the "Old Man" would survive this illness, too. However, on Tuesday, October 25, Rami Khoury, Arafat's bureau chief, called Abu Ala to report a dramatic deterioration in the chairman's condition.

Arafat was suffering from severe stomach pains and exhaustion and was showing a pronounced inability to concentrate, Khoury said. He was throwing up everything he ate and was unable to recognize some of the people around him. Abu Ala called Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who until then had been persona non grata in the Muqata, telling Abu Mazen that Arafat's health had worsened and that he must visit him. Abu Mazen, who had intimated in media interviews that Arafat was directly responsible for attempts to assassinate him during his term as prime minister, acceded to the suggestion.

A blood test administered to Arafat that night showed a further sharp decrease in the number of platelets (thrombocytes). The count stood at 46,000, compared with about 150,000 per microliter of blood in a healthy individual. A test of the bone marrow, which is responsible for producing the platelets, found nothing amiss. This raised a host of questions. A further series of tests ruled out leukemia, and there was also no sign of serious infection. The head of the Egyptian medical team, Dr. Ibrahim Mustafa, urged that Arafat be moved immediately to the hospital in Ramallah. Finally it was decided to wait for a third team, this one from Jordan, to provide an additional opinion. It was only then, on Wednesday morning, that Dr. al-Kurdi, the chairman's

personal physician, was summoned urgently to Ramallah. Suha Arafat, the leader's wife, who was visiting Tunisia, was also asked to come to the Muqata immediately. On the night between Wednesday and Thursday dozens of physicians, confidants and advisers were milling around in the Muqata. Journalists put up tents at the entry to the compound, awaiting medical bulletins.

"When I met him on that Thursday, he was not the Arafat I knew," Dr. al-Kurdi says. "He was suffering from loss of weight, pains in the region of the kidneys and stomach, a total loss of appetite and a decrease in the production of blood platelets. He had large round red spots on his face and his skin was yellow. Every physician will tell you that these are symptoms of poisoning." A hematologist from Hadassah Medical Center in Ein Karem, Jerusalem, says that if it were poisoning, there would have been a decrease in the production of white blood cells, which was not the case. However, according to al-Kurdi, it may have been an unknown poison, which does not necessarily work like "regular poison" and attack the white blood cells, too.

"There were too many peculiar indications," al-Kurdi insists. "I convened the medical team and asked them for a report on the results of their tests so far. The heads of the teams explained to me that the thrombocytopenia was not caused by a cessation in the production of the platelets in the bone marrow, but by the destruction of the platelets in the bloodstream. The possibilities of stomach cancer, leukemia or infection were also ruled out. The possibilities that remained for the cause of the illness were a failure of the immune system or poisoning. The physicians explained that those hypotheses could only be examined in a hospital abroad."

The red blotches on Arafat's face generated considerable attention. It is difficult to know whether they were caused by hemorrhaging due to problems of blood-clotting, or were skin lesions known as Kaposi's sarcoma (usually associated with elderly Ashkenazi Jews and AIDS victims). Dr. al-Kurdi says that he does not know for certain whether Arafat underwent a test for AIDS as part of the examinations conducted by the Tunisian and Egyptian medical teams. When he asked the physicians if such a test had been done, the Tunisian team responded positively and said the results were negative.

### **The blonde takes command**

Suha Arafat had not seen her husband in the four years preceding his death. She lived in a luxury apartment in Paris with her daughter, Zahwa, and got along on a monthly allowance of \$50,000, which she received from Arafat's office. According to one of Arafat's confidants, the chairman gave her everything she asked for during her residence in Paris, for fear she would leak intimate details about their relationship.

During this period Suha was in direct contact with Khoury, the bureau chief, and with the economic adviser, Mohammed Rashid. In Paris she was accompanied by bodyguards wherever she went. She was often seen in the company of a Lebanese-Christian businessman, Pierre Rizk, who maintained ramified ties with economic firms connected with the PA and the PLO. The nature of Suha Arafat's relations with Rizk is not clear, despite rumors that he was her lover.

"When Suha entered the Rais's small room, with its one bed, he recognized her

immediately and called her 'my darling' and 'my dear,'" a person who was present at the meeting recalls. "Suha kissed him on the cheek and he returned the kiss. From that moment she took total command of events. After she was briefed about the state of his health, she persuaded the Rais that he needed treatment abroad. Suha resolved the dilemma of the destination of the journey, announcing that she and her husband had decided that the treatment would take place in a hospital in Paris, the city where she resided."

Urgent consultations began with France and with Israel, which was asked to allow Arafat to go abroad and to return. Abu Ala contacted the U.S. consul general to request that the United States ensure that "the Israelis will not interfere." Finally, he spoke directly to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who agreed to let Arafat undergo tests in the Ramallah hospital. It was not clear to the Palestinians whether the go-ahead also included the possibility of going abroad. MK Ahmed Tibi spoke to Sharon's adviser Dov Weissglas, who gave him an official Israeli promise that Arafat would be able to go to France and return from there to Ramallah. Sharon even suggested sending a team of Israeli physicians to assist with the tests.

After all the authorizations were obtained, Abu Mazen, Abu Ala and Yasser Abed Rabo entered Arafat's room. "You must undergo treatment abroad so that it will be possible to help you," Abu Mazen told him. According to someone who was present, "Arafat managed to sit up and even ate a little. He was in good spirits and enjoyed hearing from us who had called and who had asked how he was doing."

Next to enter were Mohammed Dahlan and Rashid. "You are ill and you must make the trip. Don't be concerned about the question of returning," Dahlan said to Arafat. Arafat replied, "All right, I will go, but you and Rashid will come with me. We will be there two days and return." One of those present asked the Rais, ironically, whether he wanted Dahlan by his side because he was afraid he would make trouble for him back home while he was away. Arafat laughed and said that he "loves Abu Fadi [Dahlan.]"

In the adjacent conference room, a charged discussion began about who would assume Arafat's responsibilities while he was away. Ten senior figures in the PA and the PLO decided that Abu Mazen, the secretary general of the PLO, would also be the organization's acting chairman; Abu Ala would continue as prime minister and would assume the powers in foreign affairs and security affairs which were vested in him by law but which Arafat had taken from him. At the end of the discussion a press communique was issued stating that the PLO Executive Committee wished Abu Amar health and a speedy recovery and that Arafat would be going abroad for medical treatment. The names of those who would assume his duties were also published.

In the middle of a later meeting, held by the expanded Palestinian leadership, Suha Arafat entered the room, even though many of the participants did not understand why she was taking part in a meeting of the leadership. She took control of the meeting and declared that she would be leaving with her husband for Paris in the morning. A senior Fatah figure suggested that Abu Ala conduct the contacts with the French, but Suha Arafat rejected this outright, almost shouting.

"I am his wife, I am responsible for him," she said. "I have coordinated everything

with the French and there is no need for any other intervention." Shortly afterward Suha's mother, Raymonda Tawil, entered the room, too. "Everyone knew that they had not seen each other for a long time," a member of the leadership says. "We expected a dramatic reunion, but were astonished to see that Suha did not even get up to greet her mother. Raymonda bent down to her and embraced and kissed her. 'My dear Suha,' she said. But the daughter offered only a kiss and a cold hello: 'Ahlan, ya mama.'"

### **Don't be afraid, I will be back**

Arafat himself slept almost the whole of his last night in Ramallah. On Friday at 3 A.M., the PA secretary, Taeb Abed a-Rahim, and Jibril Rajoub entered his room. Arafat sat on the edge of his bed. He held the hands of the secretary and kissed them, and then turned to those in the room and made what some of them took as his last wish: "You must see to it that my daughter Zahwa marries a respectable man." That was Arafat's only testament. He said nothing about his successor or about an acting chairman.

Early in the morning two Jordanian Super Frelon helicopters landed in the Muqata plaza, one of them equipped with sophisticated medical instruments. At Arafat's request, he was joined on the journey to Paris by Dahlan, Rashid, Nabil Abu Rudeina (the PA spokesman), Khoury, Suha, one of the Jordanian physicians and a team of bodyguards. Rashid carried a suitcase containing \$500,000 in cash, to cover the needs of the entourage in Paris.

"The Rais asked me to go to the plaza and welcome the pilots," one of his confidants says. "I did so, and when I returned I told him we could go ahead to the helicopter. Arafat was confused and asked, 'What helicopter?' I explained that this was the helicopter in which we would fly to Amman and from there we would go on to the hospital in Paris. The Rais replied, 'Why a hospital and why Paris?' He was too dazed to understand what was going on around him."

A short time later Arafat emerged from the Muqata building, walking on his own but leaning on his aides and bodyguards. It was the first time he had left the besieged compound in two years. As he boarded the helicopter, he noticed Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, wiping away a tear. Arafat, who was waving his hands in greeting in all directions, turned to Erekat and told him in Arabic, in an Egyptian dialect, "Don't worry, I'll be back." The helicopters took off for Amman, leaving in their wake clouds of dust and senior Palestinian figures, some of them crying and some not so much, and, almost as usual, Dr. al-Kurdi, the personal physician, who was again forgotten.

Percy military hospital is known as one of the finest centers in Europe for the treatment of blood diseases. However, because it is a military hospital, the administration requested that the presence of those accompanying the patient be kept to a minimum and require the approval of a member of a first-degree relative, in this case Suha Arafat. This procedure served Suha's interests: she kept three of Arafat's confidants - Dahlan, Abu Rudeina and Rashid - from having any contact with the chairman.

The three were compelled to lodge in a distant hotel, the InterContinental. "She

simply abused them," says a member of the entourage. "They were forced to give in to the dictates of a woman who was not by his side in the four most difficult years of his life. The three men remained at the hotel, dying of boredom, and spoke by phone with journalists, pretending to be updated. Rashid was there as a walking treasury. Whoever needed money for food or clothes asked him and he would pull out bills from the suitcase and hand them out."

### **The patient is in a coma**

The medical report of the team that treated Arafat at Percy Hospital is one of the PA's most closely guarded documents. One copy was given to the widow, Suha Arafat. A handful of copies were made available to several senior PA figures. In the course of hundreds of pages, the physicians document every test the chairman underwent in France and every suspicion that was examined, and they recapitulate his medical history. The various papers are contained in two thick folders. The findings, which are here being published for the first time, tell the story of the two weeks in which Arafat lay dying in Paris, but refrain from offering an explanation for his death, beyond the fact that it was due to massive intracranial bleeding, causing the brain to sink to the base of the skull (herniation).

"From a discussion that took place among a large number of medical experts from a range of specialties, and in terms of all the results of the tests that were administered, it is not possible to determine a cause that will explain the combination of symptoms that caused the death of the patient [Arafat]," wrote Prof. B. Pats in the report of the hospital's intensive care unit.

In the first three days of Arafat's hospitalization, the entourage was still optimistic. The Rais showed signs of recovery. The stomach pains lessened, there were no signs of a tumor, the clotting disorders stabilized and Arafat started to eat again (for the first two days he was fed intravenously).

"There was an improvement in the state of shock and confusion. The patient engaged in minor activity, such as walking in the room, and communicated with those around him," the medical report states. A serious deterioration occurred on the fifth night of the hospitalization. The production of blood platelets again fell sharply.

"The patient again became drowsy, tired and confused. The next day a further decline was diagnosed and there was no reaction to the surroundings. A neurological examination showed that Arafat had fallen into a coma and was responding only to physical stimuli such as punctures. The left side of his body suffered from paralysis and an examination of the brains' electrical activity showed a considerable slowdown."

Physicians in the hematological ward, where Arafat was hospitalized until being moved to intensive care, wrote, "The 75-year-old patient lapsed into a coma as a result of infection, clotting problems or both alike. He was hospitalized because of an intestinal disease that resembles an inflammation of the large intestine combined with clotting problems, though without infection (which causes clotting) being identified during the transfer to the intensive care unit. Evidence of hemophagocytosis [a situation, sometimes seen in AIDS patients, in which cells of the immune system swallow red blood cells] was found. The deterioration in the state of consciousness,

which has its source in the brain, developed into a coma which compelled the patient's transfer to the intensive care unit [ICU] on the sixth day of hospitalization."

In ICU, Arafat was injected with large doses of medicines. The medical team decided to maintain the comatose state so that his body would be able to cope with the distress it was encountering. However, nothing helped. Arafat's confidants were told that he was in a state of "reversible coma." As the hours passed, Arafat sank into a deeper coma. This time, it would not be reversible.

Despite being cut off from the hospital, Mohammed Dahlan continued to receive reports from French intelligence about the chairman's condition. On November 3, an intelligence officer called him to report that Arafat's situation was critical and "it is a matter of hours." Dahlan decided to act. He went to the hospital and met with Suha, but again she refused to let him visit his leader and rejected his proposal to summon Abu Ala and Abu Mazen to Paris.

Dahlan left for Ramallah, to update Abu Mazen, the successor-designate. In the meantime, French President Jacques Chirac arrived at the hospital and saw Arafat through the glass window of the ICU room. Chirac, who had heard about the anger generated by Suha's refusal to allow the PA leaders to see Arafat before his death, asked her to agree to a visit.

"True, he is your husband, but he is also a public figure," he told her. Deeply agitated, Suha did not hesitate to fire back at her host, "If you allow the senior figures to visit, I will sue you in court. Do not intervene."

In Ramallah, Dahlan met privately with Abu Mazen. He recommended that he leave immediately for Paris, despite Suha Arafat's opposition. Abu Mazen and Abu Ala hesitated. They were afraid that if they arrived at the hospital in Paris and were ejected, the story would find its way into the media and they might even be accused of trying to depose Arafat. Dahlan spoke to Suha again, this time from Abu Mazen's house, in the presence of senior PA officials: "We respect you and will help you," he promised her. But Suha would not budge. "I will not let anyone in to see him," she stated.

Finally, the PA secretary, Taeb Abed a-Rahim, warned the leaders that "the Palestinian Authority is liable to fall if a delegation does not leave for Paris immediately." The participants at the meeting agreed, and a short time later Abu Ala, Abu Mazen and Ruhi Fatouh, the Speaker of the Palestinian parliament, left for France.

Learning that the senior Palestinian delegation was on its way, Suha lost her head. Her lawyers sent a letter to the hospital administration threatening a lawsuit if the Palestinians were allowed to visit her husband. On November 7, Suha, for unknown reasons, rejected an unequivocal recommendation by the medical team to perform a liver biopsy on Arafat in order to rule out the possibility of a rare lymphoma (a malignant disease of the lymphatic system).

At the same time, she asked Walid al-Omari, the Al Jazeera correspondent in Israel and the territories, to let her make a special announcement in a live broadcast. Al-



Omari, like his millions of viewers, was flabbergasted at what Suha Arafat read from a prepared statement by phone: "This is a plea to the Palestinian people. A group of plotters and conspirators is seeking to bury Abu Amar while he is still alive ... But he is in a good state of health and he will return. I will not allow this."

The dramatic declaration had a boomerang effect. The media interviewed Palestinian citizens who lashed out at Suha. The Palestinian leaders, who had by then arrived in Paris, felt the tailwind of encouragement from the territories. The president of Tunisia spoke with Suha and warned her that she "had crossed every line."

The criticism had its effect. When the Palestinian delegation arrived at the hospital (after meeting with President Chirac), Suha fell on them in tears, embracing and kissing them and apologizing for what she had done. At the same time, it was agreed that only Abu Ala would be allowed to visit Arafat.

"Abu Ala collapsed the moment he entered the room and saw the Rais," says one of the observers through the window. "The Rais's whole body was connected to tubes, he had lost a great deal of weight and he was not conscious. The medical team had to help Abu Ala up from the floor."

The delegation received an official briefing from the medical team on Arafat's condition (by decision of the French authorities and contrary to Suha's wish). "The head of the team of physicians at Percy and the hospital director explained to us that all his body systems had stopped functioning," relates Nasser al-Kidwa, Arafat's nephew and at the time the PLO ambassador to the United Nations.

"They said there could be several causes: cancer, serious infection or poisoning. However, the physicians explained that they had found with certainty that Arafat did not have cancer and that they had not found a serious infection. They also said they had found no evidence of any known poison." As the Palestinian delegation made its way back to Ramallah it was clear to them that they had to prepare quickly for Arafat's funeral and for a transfer of power. At the family's request, the president of the Sharia courts in the territories, Sheikh Bayoud al-Tamimi, traveled to Paris to be with Arafat in his final moments.

All that remained was to issue the official announcement of Arafat's death, but it continued to be delayed. Six days had gone by since Arafat fell into a coma, but Sheikh al-Tamimi reported from the hospital that Abu Amar, who was connected to respirators, was still alive. Under Islamic religious law, it is strictly forbidden to disconnect a person from a respirator as long as he is defined as being alive.

On Tuesday, November 9, at 4 A.M., Arafat opened his eyes for the last time. He responded to touch and to speech. An hour later there was no longer any response. A CT of his brain showed massive bleeding, "like a tsunami," in various areas of the brain. The possibility of surgery was rejected out of hand because of his general condition.

"Subconsciously we knew it was over, but we kept hoping the whole time," al-Kidwa says.

However, at 3:30 A.M. on November 11 Arafat died in the Paris hospital, some two weeks after leaving the Muqata, where he would be buried.

Following solemn but restrained memorial ceremonies in Paris and Cairo, Arafat's body was brought back to the presidential compound in Ramallah. As two Super Frelons, this time Egyptian, landed, they were mobbed by a huge crowd. Thousands of Palestinians charged the helicopter containing the body of the "Father."

The organizers implored the tens of thousands of mourners to allow Arafat's coffin to be moved to the burial site, but to no avail. Dozens of members of the security forces fired into the air in an attempt to disperse the crowd, but the shooting was mixed with the fusillades of salute let loose by armed militants from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade. It was only a few hours later, amid the great melee, that the organizers of the funeral succeeded in burying Arafat, with only a handful of people noticing the act of interment. The widow, Suha Arafat, preferred not to come to the ceremony in Ramallah, after being told that she would not get a warm welcome.

### **Poison, AIDS or infection?**

Yasser Arafat died at an advanced age after living for several years in a narrow room without ventilation. He was under tremendous mental pressure as the leader of the PA and the PLO and in his last years was often in danger of his life, under the off-and-on siege which Israel imposed on him. Nevertheless, every senior PA figure we talked to suspects that the Rais did not die a natural death but was poisoned. "Israel wanted to liquidate Abu Amar and in the past already poisoned Khaled Meshal. Why should it not try again?" they say.

The official French medical report rules out the poisoning option almost completely. A separate toxicological report attached to the medical report shows that all the tests for toxins that were carried out in three toxicological laboratories turned up negative results. The report lists a series of well-known toxins (paracetamol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine, methadone and others) which the toxicological laboratories in France looked for in Arafat's blood. Of course, they had no way of searching for poisons with which they were not familiar. All the tests were done under false names. The results of the toxicological tests in the separate report appear under the name of Etienne Louvet," born 1932. On the other hand, the report does not state with certainty the cause of Arafat's illness.

"The toxicological tests that were carried out and consultations among specialists in several fields do not confirm that poisoning constitutes the explanation for the patient's condition," the summarizing report of the intensive care unit states, in the section dealing with the tests for toxins. France, by the way, initially refused to make the report available to the PA, on the grounds that only family members were entitled to receive it. As a compromise, it was decided that the report would be given to Nasser al-Kidwa, the nephew. Al-Kidwa made the report available to the prime minister, Abu Ala, and to the Palestinian minister of health.

The report and the reconstruction of Arafat's last days raise a number of questions. The blood samples taken and the biopsies performed by the Tunisian medical team in

the Muqata were sent to the PLO embassy in Jordan. From Amman, they were supposed to be taken to Tunis and Paris, but all trace of them was lost. The report also fails to mention the blotches on Arafat's face. Equally difficult to explain is Suha Arafat's refusal to allow a liver biopsy to be performed on her husband. Israeli physicians who have seen the report say that their impression is that the document is more detailed than necessary, almost as though it had been "doctored," so to speak - edited with a view to the possible implications of its publication.

Most puzzling of all, though, is the fact that the report, which covers hundreds of pages and cites every medicine, test and possible illness that might be connected with Arafat's death, does not mention or even hint at the possibility that Arafat had AIDS, or that he was given a test to rule out that possibility. A senior Israeli physician maintains that Arafat contracted AIDS shortly before his death. The physician heard from a close friend of his - a French physician who was part of the team that treated Arafat in his final days - that the Rais had AIDS. Israeli security sources confirm that the report about AIDS reached them but refrain from stating whether there is anything to it.

There are also some on the Palestinian side who know, and also confirm, the AIDS theory, but believe it is related to poisoning. "I know that the physicians in Paris found the AIDS virus in Arafat's blood," says Dr. al-Kurdi, "but this is material that was introduced into his body in order to camouflage the poisoning," he says. Al-Kurdi, who was kept away from his patient in Arafat's last weeks, will not say how he obtained this information.

Prof. Gil Lugassi, the hematologist, who read the French report, says that the symptoms it describes could be characteristic of AIDS. "An infection that begins in the digestive tract and deteriorates very quickly into the collapse of the blood clotting system is typical of AIDS. What is simply inconceivable and appears very bizarre is that the possibility of AIDS was totally ignored. The report mentions dozens of diseases that were checked, or bacteria, but there is no evidence of HIV tests and not even any mention that the subject was discussed. "I can only assume that if there had been an AIDS test with negative results, there would have been no problem saying so in the report."

Still, Prof. Lugassi does not jump to the conclusion that it was AIDS. "There is definitely a possibility that the digestive tract became infected as a result of a bacterium in food that was not kept well, such as meat that spoiled, and the bacterium brought about the clotting problem. It is possible that with a bit of antibiotics the infecting bacterium disappeared - thus explaining why no source for the infection was found. But because of the late identification, it was no longer possible to cure the disease that it caused, the thrombocytopenia."

Similarly, a senior physician and AIDS specialist at a large hospital in Israel says that the fact that the report totally ignores the AIDS possibility raises serious questions, as does its failure to mention any expert in infectious diseases (and AIDS specialist) in the long list of physicians who treated Arafat.

Still, he says, the probability that Arafat contracted AIDS is not high. The AIDS specialist, who went over the medical report, says it is not likely that an illness that

lasted for two weeks (until the move to the Paris hospital), with serious diarrhea, vomiting and damage to the digestive tract, and led to a grave clotting problem, was caused by AIDS.

"Even if he was injected with AIDS viruses at a later stage [as Arafat's personal physician maintains], it is improbable that such rapid and severe damage was done to the digestive tract. In addition, a few days after the disease erupted, Arafat's immune system had not yet been seriously damaged [the lymphocyte count, an element in the immune system, was not especially low.]"

According to a senior Israeli physician who read the report carefully, the symptoms it describes, which appeared about four hours after the dinner he ate on October 12, 2004, raise a reasonable suspicion that this was the most critical meal in the life and death of Yasser Arafat.

"It is a classic case of food poisoning, which is taught in medical school," the physician explains. According to the description in the medical file, he notes, it is less likely that this is a regular and familiar type of food poisoning which is caused by a bacterium that secretes toxins. That sort of poisoning would have been detected in the series of tests Arafat underwent while he was still in the Muqata, and would have been contained with the help of the antibiotics.

It is definitely probable, the senior physician says, that Arafat's food had poison in it, which caused the outbreak of the unknown disease. This physician cites a possible toxin, one that causes the exact symptoms which afflicted Arafat, and which was not examined by the medical team in Paris. The toxin is called ricin; it can be introduced into food and was used as a biological weapon in the attack on the Tokyo subway.

How do you explain the fact that the physicians found no trace of the poison?

"The physicians in Paris looked for toxins, but that was more than two weeks after the dinner, and it is probable that if poison was present in the food it was absorbed quickly into the body, did serious damage and was then excreted - in other words, it disappeared. Moreover, the toxicological laboratories in Paris looked for familiar poisons and could not have looked for something they were not familiar with."

Still, the same physician says, the less likely possibility, of a natural bacterium in the food, cannot be entirely ruled out, "if we assume that the blood tests that were done in Ramallah produced imprecise results because of the lengthy time in getting to Tunisia and that the antibiotics he received came too late."

The Palestinians also prefer the poisoning theory. According to Nasser al-Kidwa, "Every expert we consulted explained that even the simplest poison manufactured by a middling scientist would be difficult to identify for a brilliant scientist."

Al-Kidwa adds, "I cannot say with certainty that Israel murdered him, but I can also not rule out that possibility. After all, the doctors themselves did not rule it out. It is the most reasonable possibility. There are large questions about what happened."

Jibril Rajoub agrees: "Arafat's death was not natural and I do not think that Israel is

innocent. Arafat did not die by chance. Someone wanted him dead and took action to cause it." Mohammed Dahlan believes that "Arafat did not die a natural death. The possibility that he was poisoned definitely exists. Whoever wanted to get to him could have done so easily."

Arafat's aides note that the security arrangements around the Rais were pitiful. He received sweets (such as chocolate and halva) from hundreds of visitors, as well as medicines. Arafat was vulnerable to being hurt by pins which people affixed to his clothing and gladly received gifts without any control. After his death, the Palestinian Presidential Guard conducted an investigation to examine the possibility that he had been poisoned.

Among those who were questioned were the cooks who prepared Arafat's food and the officials who had access to him. The investigation ruled out the possibility that his food was poisoned, because many others also partook of the portions that were prepared for the Rais. However, the possibility of poisoning by means of the sweets or the medicines he received was not ruled out. In the light of the many rumors about poisoning, the PA decided to establish a special commission of inquiry to investigate the circumstances of Arafat's death, but as of the summer of 2005 its conclusions had not been published.

There are some Palestinians who suspect that it was not necessarily Israelis who were responsible for Arafat's death. "I refused to cooperate with the commission of inquiry," says Arafat's personal physician, Dr. al-Kurdi. "It was clear to me that the establishment of the commission of inquiry was in fact an attempt to prevent or delay the publication of the conclusions. The most basic method that could have been used to discover the circumstances of death was an autopsy. That was not done, and those circumstances are very suspicious. I continue to believe that Arafat was poisoned - all the symptoms attest to that."

### **'Doing a Meshal' on Arafat**

In the years preceding Arafat's death, an intensive debate was conducted in Israel about the possibility of kidnapping and expelling the Rais. At a later stage, plans to liquidate him were also contemplated. Ariel Sharon himself discussed with senior IDF officers the operational plans to expel Arafat and was present at exercises at which the possibilities were dramatized.

The plans were never authorized, because the commanders of Sayeret Matkal, the ultra-elite commando unit that devised them, declined to promise that Arafat would not be hurt during the kidnapping: Sharon was apprehensive about the reactions in the Arab world if Arafat were to be killed.

The chairman was constantly surrounded by bodyguards and aides, and the concern was that it would not be possible to seize him without opening fire in the crowded bureau. The decision-makers, for their part, declined to take the risk of ordering the soldiers not to respond with fire even if they were fired on. And because Arafat always carried two pistols, intelligence personnel did not rule out the possibility that he would prefer to go down in history as having died a hero's death, in an exchange of fire with his foes, rather than yield to the Israeli scheme to expel him from Palestine.

Senior security sources confirm that the more intense Sharon's loathing for Arafat became, and the more the Rais was portrayed as the major obstacle to progress, the more serious the discussion about his liquidation became. Is it possible that Israel secretly worked to "do a Meshal" on Arafat - to poison him without leaving traces? According to the sources, the answer is negative. The risk, in the event that Israel's responsibility would become known, was too high - the more so as Sharon gave his word to President Bush not to kill Arafat. Too many people would have had to share in the secret of such an operation, the sources say. Sooner or later, someone would have been liable to talk and Israel's involvement would have been exposed - and Sharon could not take a risk of that magnitude. In response to Palestinian allegations of poisoning, the Prime Minister's Bureau stated that this is "nonsense. The matter was checked in the past and found to be untrue."

### **The case for poisoning**

A senior Israeli physician: Most of the indications in the medical report suggest that Arafat was poisoned by way of the dinner he ate on the evening of October 12, 2004.

- In the past, Israel considered the possibility of liquidating Arafat.
- In the past, Israel used an unidentified poison in an attempt to assassinate Hamas senior official Khaled Meshal.
- The failure of France's finest physicians to identify the cause of Arafat's mysterious disease might indicate highly sophisticated poisoning.
- Most of the symptoms, including the accelerated destruction of the blood platelets, could indicate poisoning of some kind.
- During his many months under siege, Arafat was not guarded carefully and received food, sweets and medicines from many visitors.

### **The case against poisoning**

The French physicians ran dozens of toxicological tests on Arafat in an attempt to identify any known poison, but found no sign of poisoning.

- The destruction of the platelets and the other symptoms might also indicate infection or failure of the immune system.
- The tests done by the Palestinian security establishment found nothing to substantiate a claim of poisoning by Israel.
- The Prime Minister's Bureau denies any Israeli involvement in Arafat's death.

### **The case for AIDS**

Arafat's personal physician: "I know that the physicians in Paris found the AIDS virus in Arafat's blood [but in my opinion he was poisoned]."

- An Israeli physician heard an identical report from a French physician who was involved in the efforts to save Arafat. Sources in the Israeli defense establishment are familiar with the report.

- Some of the findings of the tests that were administered to Arafat in France are consistent with AIDS symptoms. Blotches that appeared on Arafat's face resemble the description of Kaposi's sarcoma, a rare skin cancer, which is associated with AIDS.
- Even though Arafat underwent dozens of tests of different kinds to identify his illness, the obvious test for AIDS is not mentioned in the report drawn up by the French medical team.

#### **The case against AIDS**

Arafat's personal physician maintains that the AIDS virus was not found in a test for the disease which he administered to Arafat in the Muqata three months before the deterioration in his condition. It is not reasonable that Arafat contracted the disease in the last three months when he was under siege in the Muqata.

- According to his personal physician, the Tunisian medical team that examined Arafat shortly before he left for Paris also claimed to have run a test for AIDS, which turned out negative.
- The symptoms of Arafat's illness are also consistent with non-AIDS infection.
- The lesions on Arafat's face might have been due to a clotting deficiency and were not necessarily an indication of Kaposi's sarcoma.
- There is no definite proof in the record that supports the AIDS theory.

#### **The case for infection**

The substandard sanitary conditions in the Muqata, Arafat's advanced age and his poor health made him vulnerable.

- Even though no bacteria were found in his blood, the president of the Israeli Society of Hematology explains that the bacterium that caused the fatal disease could have been destroyed by the antibiotics and thus not identified in the tests, but the disease it caused was already irreversible.
- The symptoms of the disease could fit this possibility.

#### **The case against infection**

The French physicians found no indication of bacterial infection in the dozens of tests they administered.

- The Egyptian and Tunisian medical teams that examined Arafat in the Muqata, before he was taken to France, also ruled out the possibility of infection.
- A senior Israeli AIDS specialist says that the antibiotics, and Arafat's body itself, should have been able to cope successfully with infection caused by spoiled food, for example.