



# A drumbeat of negative commentary

With a few exceptions, reactions to Shimon Peres's death in the Arab world painted him as a warmonger, not a peacemaker

**THOSE OLD** enough to remember will never forget the striking scene of a uniformed Charles De Gaulle towering over the no less dignified Haile Selassie as they mournfully saluted John F. Kennedy's coffin in November 1963. Thirty-two years later, Yitzhak Rabin's funeral was punctuated by the eulogies of US president Bill Clinton, Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak, and graced by numerous additional officials from Arab states.

Shimon Peres's funeral drew a bevy of world leaders, as well, but not from the Arab world. The contexts, of course, were far different.

Rabin's assassination came at the height of the Arab-Israeli peace process, which his killer was seeking to derail. More than two decades have elapsed and the conflict remains unresolved, for which Arab public opinion overwhelmingly blames Israel.

While most Western leaders and commentators eulogized Peres as a visionary tirelessly committed to the pursuit of peace, the dominant reactions in the Arab world – among analysts, journalists and social media alike – were overwhelmingly negative.

With this in mind, official condolences were few and far between, and high-level Arab state representatives were notably absent, apart from Egypt's foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry.

Jordan was represented by a deputy prime minister. Morocco, a country with an extensive history of unofficial but meaningful relations with Israel, and which Peres had visited more than once, was quietly represented by André Azoulay, the Palace's longtime Jewish financial adviser.

Therefore, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's attendance, which was harshly condemned across the Palestinian spectrum, was striking, and even courageous. He was appropriately praised by both President Barack Obama and former president Bill Clinton in their eulogies for Peres (by contrast, he was unacknowledged in the eulogies of Israel's president and prime minister).

The drumbeat of negative commentary regarding Peres ironically referred to some of the same things for which he was praised by Israeli and Western commentators: his closeness to David Ben-Gurion; his central role in the building of the Dimona nuclear reactor; and being the architect of the close military relationship with France during the 1950s and 1960s. Peres's controversial support for the Israeli settlement enterprise in the West Bank in the mid-1970s was also banefully noted.

The failure of the Oslo agreements was further proof to his Arab critics that Peres's intentions were anything but peaceful, with his single biggest crime being the killing (intentionally, in Arab eyes) of more than 100 Lebanese civilians in the village of Kana, during Israel's "Grapes of Wrath" campaign against Hezbollah in March 1996. Peres's defense of Israel's repeated mili-

tary operations in Gaza provided them with further "proof" he was a warmonger, not a peacemaker.

The condemnations seemed to contain an element of frustration with the declining salience of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notwithstanding its periodic flare-ups and continued potential for renewed large-scale violence, other more acute crises have crowded it out: the horror in Syria; ISIS; the Arab Spring uprisings; and the challenge posed to Sunni Arab states by Iran.

A small sign of the resulting deepening of strategic ties between Israel and Sunni Arab states, including the Gulf monarchies, was provided by Bahrain's foreign minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, who tweeted: "Rest in peace President Shimon Peres, a man of war and a man of the still elusive peace in the Middle East."

**ROUNDLY CONDEMNED** in Arab social media, the tweet was consistent with previous public comments by Khalifa, including a recent speech to the UN General Assembly. Bahrain's Sunni monarchy is in a particularly difficult situation, having forcefully repressed its Shi'ite majority, drawing US opprobrium. With its eyes on Washington, adopting a more conciliatory position toward Israel clearly has instrumental value for Bahrain.

Another small, but telling, expression of Israel's continued ties with Gulf states was the arrival in Jerusalem of a senior Omani official (reported by an Israeli TV news station, but not confirmed elsewhere).

Occasional commentaries bucked the dominant negative regional discourse surrounding Peres's death.

The maverick Iranian political analyst Hassan Hanizadeh said Peres had been a moderating force in the region and helped prevent conflict. A few Kurds in Iraq were reported to have set up a mourning tent for Peres, and Moroccan Berber activists sent condolences to their Israeli friends. The Palestinian analyst Mohammed Daraghmeah praised the former president's leadership and vision.

Although Peres's vision of a New Middle East contained utopian elements, these exceptional statements, as well as the recognition by neighboring states of shared strategic and economic interests, suggest that meaningful progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track would substantially, even exponentially, accelerate these trends.

Herzl's prophecy, "If you will it, it's no dream," perhaps then would be Peres's legacy, as well. ■

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