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Arafat and Sharon Antagonists at Seventy

*For our part, we will honor our commitments...
Our participation in the great peace process
means that we are betting
everything on the future.*

Yasser Arafat

*on the signing of the Oslo II Accord
in September 1995 to implement Palestinian
rule over a portion of the Occupied Territories*

*I don't know anyone who has as much civilian Jewish blood
on his hands as Arafat since the Nazis' time.*

Ariel Sharon

*then Israeli Defense Minister,
October 1995*

In the late 1920s, two babies are born some 200 miles apart into families with deep attachment to the Holy Land. Seven decades and more later, the two will take center stage as bitter antagonists in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Neither will keep his birth name.

In 1928 on a moshav north of Tel Aviv in the British Palestine Mandate, Shmuel and Dvora Scheinerman, who have immigrated from Russia six years prior, name their new son Ariel. The family drops "Scheinerman" and takes the name of the region where they have settled, the "Sharon" Valley.

In Cairo the following year, a successful Palestinian merchant and his wife name their son Muhammed Abdel-Rahman Abdel-Raouf Arafat al-Qudwa, but his family call him "Yasser."

Lessons in Hatred

Growing up, Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat have contrasting experiences that will forever color their viewpoints.

On the agricultural settlement where his family has settled, Sharon's father and mother are ostracized by the community for refusing to participate in Bolshevik-style public revilement rallies. Ariel learns to live with rejection. His parents are rich in books but otherwise poor. They save so that Ariel can attend high school, a goal rare among moshav families of the time. When he is fourteen, he joins a paramilitary group whose duty is to protect the settlement from Arab raiders. His father gives him a knife. "The knife was symbolic," Sharon later writes,

“to protect ourselves from our enemies. It was a lesson I have never forgotten.” By age seventeen, Ariel has been inducted into the Haganah, the Jewish underground.

Arafat’s mother dies when he is five, and he is sent to live with his uncle’s family in Jerusalem. His uncle is among many Palestinians who want the British out of their land. He has been active in the underground. Yasser remembers British soldiers breaking into his uncle’s house after midnight, beating members of the family and smashing furniture. By 1938, Yasser is back in Cairo, and eight years later, at age seventeen, he is smuggling arms to Palestine to be used against the British and the Jews.

The Cause

In the Haganah in 1945, Sharon works on missions to harry the British and bring Holocaust refugees into Palestine. He becomes an instructor of police, a regimental intelligence officer, and in the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948, a platoon commander in the army. He studies history at Hebrew University and later receives a law degree. But he is never far from military service. He participates in each of Israel’s wars, and in between he becomes an expert in gathering intelligence. He organizes and leads “Unit 101,” an elite unit that makes bloody retaliatory strikes against Palestinian guerrillas infiltrating Israel.

Arafat is nineteen when Israel declares independence, and he desponds over the results of the first Israeli-Arab war, shocked that the Palestinians now do not even have the state and territory that could have been theirs had the Arabs agreed to the UN partition plan. Arafat (the name he takes after finishing engineering studies in Cairo) is consumed with two interlocking ideas: that Palestinians must have their own independent country, and that the state of Israel must go. Working in Kuwait, Arafat forms the Fatah party, dedicated to these ends. Fatah later merges with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to form the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and Arafat is chosen as PLO leader.

Terrorists

Leading both his Fatah party and the PLO, Arafat sets up a base in Jordan, where the largest number of Palestinian refugees live and where he can garner support and recruits. From Jordan he directs efforts to destabilize Israel. He orders night raids across the border into Israeli settlements. He arranges for hijacking of international plane flights, and at one point his operatives throw overboard a Jewish tourist aboard an Italian cruise liner. As Arafat grows in power, his PLO becomes a threat to Jordan. Climaxing a two-year civil war, in 1971 Jordan’s King Hussein throws out Arafat and his PLO. Arafat sets up shop in Beirut

and in 1972 his PLO operatives manage to assassinate almost the entire Israeli Olympics team in Munich. From Beirut, Arafat directs new assaults against Israel with the help of Hezbollah guerrillas infiltrating across Israel's northern border. Sharon has had enough. In 1982 he invades Lebanon, and his troops quickly reach Beirut. He wants to assassinate Arafat, and he bombs Arafat's headquarters. But Arafat escapes. United States and French troops land in Lebanon to escort Arafat and the PLO to Tunisia, and Sharon is left to deal with Lebanon's ongoing civil war between Muslim and Christian factions. Muslim terrorists assassinate the Christian President-Elect. In senseless retaliation, which Sharon does nothing to prevent, Christian militia raid two Palestinian refugee camps, slaughtering hundreds. (The shock reverberates internationally, and in 2002 Sharon is sued by survivors in court action in Brussels on the charge of a crime against humanity. Although it is determined that the court does not have jurisdiction, and nothing comes of the effort, the memory of the 1982 refugee camp atrocity is kept alive.) Because it happens on his watch, and the outraged Knesset says he should have prevented the massacre, Sharon is called home in disgrace. But first he must pull his army back to southern Lebanon, where they can keep watch on Hezbollah guerrillas. At home and out of uniform, Sharon remains popular with right-leaning Israelis. He is given government posts responsible for building Israeli settlements within the West Bank.