Mourning the 'Son of Jerusalem': Faisal al-Husseini

Graham Usher

Two women meet on the steps of Orient House in Israeli occupied East Jerusalem and slump, weeping, in the other's arms. Dozens of men are doing the same. One old man in a traditional Palestinian headscarf braces himself, tries to speak to the tumult of emotions he and everyone else is feeling. He turns away. He can't do it.

A more practiced spokesman - Palestinian Member of Knesset, Azmi Bishara - takes over. In a tremulous voice he explains why the death on May 31st from a heart attack in a Kuwait hotel of the PLO's representative in Jerusalem, Faisal al-Husseini, is such an incalculable loss to the Palestinian people. "Faisal's legacy was the struggle to keep Arab Jerusalem Arab. He represented Arab continuity and leadership in Jerusalem. And he combined this with reason and courage."

Arab continuity and leadership

Faisal al-Husseini was born in Baghdad in 1940, the son of Abdul Qader al-Husseini, the almost mythic Palestinian leader who died defending Jerusalem in the 1948 war that saw Israel born through the violent dispossession of his people.

At 17, Husseini the son joined the Arab National Movement, when the rubric was "what was taken by force must be regained by force" and when the aspiration was the liberation of Palestine "from the river to the sea."

That dream perished when Israel occupied Gaza, the West Bank and rest of Jerusalem in 1967 and Husseini, together with thousands of other Palestinians, joined forces with Yassir Arafat's Fatah movement.

It was to remain his sole political affiliation, though never an easy one. On the one hand, Arafat welcomed the revolutionary and ancestral legitimacy Husseini brought to the PLO's ranks (as guardians of Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque, the Husseinis trace their lineage to the Prophet Mohammed). For precisely the same reasons, he distrusted Husseini as a potential "alternative" to him, especially in the West Bank, where the Palestinian leader was not to set foot for another 27 years.

The challenge was always more imagined than real. Husseini was no match for Arafat's peculiar strain of patrimonialism, whether in the political or financial realms. "He was more a diplomat than a politician," admitted a long-time Israeli interlocutor, Menachem Klein. It was a diplomacy he practiced not only with diplomats, but also in the social struggles of institution building, protest, and dialogue.

In 1979, Husseini founded the Arab Studies Center in Orient House - an archive aimed at rescuing the Palestinian heritage in Jerusalem from an Israeli material and ideological offensive bent on denying it. From this base, he become the natural leader of Jerusalem's Palestinians in the first 1987-1993 Intifada, advocating (before the PLO officially did so)

a two-state solution to the conflict and popularizing mass, non-violent protests as the means to achieve it.

It was due to this position - and these sentiments - that he smoothed the way to U.S.-mediated peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians in 1991 and was appointed the head of the Palestinian delegation at the Madrid Peace Conference the same year. And it was in the name of that delegation that he quietly transformed Orient House from a registered hotel owned by his family to the PLO's de facto political headquarters in East Jerusalem.

For all these reasons, Husseini was cordially detested by successive Israeli governments, which did everything from protesting his presence "as a Jerusalem resident" at Madrid to forcibly trying to close down his institutions. In 1999, the Israeli prime minister at the time, Binyamin Netanyahu, waged the most recent contest over the political status of Orient House. Husseini quelled the assault by getting Israeli Jewish allies to serve an injunction on their government, courtesy of the Israeli Supreme Court.

The same blend of patriotism and pragmatism was evident in the latest Palestinian uprising. In the last six months of his life, Husseini visited the U.S., Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia and, finally, Kuwait. In Washington, he was cold-shouldered by the new Bush administration. The Kuwaitis assailed him in the name of Arafat, despite the fact that Husseini was one of the few Palestinians to publicly oppose Saddam Hussein's invasion of their country.

But everywhere else he was well received. This was partly because of his relative independence from Arafat and reputation for probity. Yet it was mainly to do with the cause he personified. "What is it that brings the Palestinians together from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel?" he once asked. "Is it the promise of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza? Of course not - it is Jerusalem."

Reason and Courage

However, Husseini's nationalism never translated into a reflex anti-Israelism. During his five stints and 42 months in Israeli jails he taught himself Hebrew. He used it fluently to nurture dialogue with the Israeli "peace camp," first with dissident leftist groups but gradually with mainstream Israeli politicians like Yossi Beilin and academics like Klein.

Nor did the dialogue end with the current Intifada, as it has with most other Israelis and Palestinians. In April, he was again in London for discussions with Beilin and Klein, trying to hammer out a mutually acceptable solution to the question of Jerusalem.

Husseini's position on this issue was always fixed: absolute rigidity over Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem, including the Old City, coupled with absolute flexibility over how this could be implemented to respect the needs and sensitivities of both peoples. "His death is a loss not only to Palestinian peace camp, but to our camp too," said Beilin.

That is certain, which is why so many Palestinians mourned his passing with the phrase nakba or "disaster." For them he was not just patriotic, rational and brave. He was wise, combining a rare alloy of knowledge and experience that at times bordered on prophecy.

In one of the last interviews I held with him,

we discussed the reasons for the failure of the Camp David summit last July. In his view - and despite 100 years of now open, now covert, conflict with the Palestinians - the Israelis had yet to internalize that peace has a price, and that the minimum down-payment is their full withdrawal from the territories they occupied in the 1967 war, including East Jerusalem. He was concerned about this denial far more for the Israelis than for the Palestinians.

"I worry about today," he said. "But the Israelis should worry about the future. Today the majority of Palestinians are ready to give up 80 percent of their lands in Palestine in return for Israel's recognition of their full rights in the remaining 20 percent. In ten years time there will be a demographic parity between the two peoples in Israel and the occupied territories. In 30 years, Palestinians will be the majority. And then they may want both their rights and their lands - in West Jerusalem, Haifa, Acre and Jaffa."

He also worried that the time would soon come when his people would stop "listening to clowns like me who advocate peace and coexistence." He was quite clear to whom they would be listening instead.

"There are many fundamentalisms in our region - Islamic, nationalist and Jewish," he said. "They have a lot of energy but no target, no rallying symbol. But once the peace process collapses, Jerusalem will become the symbol and the target. And then the only outcome is collision."

Those comments were made one month before the Al-Aqsa Intifada "collided" in Jerusalem and six months before Ariel Sharon, the Jewish fundamentalist par excellence, was elected Prime Minister of Israel.

Faisal Husseini, 60, leaves behind him a wife, a son and a daughter and a void - in the words of one Palestinian friend - "that no one, absolutely no one, can replace."

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