

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

The New Paradigm ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

It says something that within 12 hours of its completion Yasser Arafat's funeral was no longer the lead story on Al-Jazeera. The funeral took place at midday. By evening Fallujah was back at the top of the rundown. You had to wait about six minutes to get any news about Arafat – and the broadcast I watched had no pictures of the actual funeral in Cairo until nearly 20 minutes in. Instead there was a long piece that began with shouting mourners, segued to the surviving Palestinian leaders receiving a hero's welcome as their helicopters landed in Ramallah, and then featured lots of man-on-the-street soundbites from people in the crowd.

It needs to be said here that there is no single 'right' way to put together a newscast. But the choices Al-Jazeera's producers were making Friday evening illustrated two fascinating truths – one fleeting, the other, perhaps, longer-lasting – about the Middle East at this moment in time.

The fleeting truth is that Iraq has become the first news story in a generation capable of pushing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict down the news agenda for more than a few days at a time. Over the long of time this will not last, but even temporarily it is an extraordinary development.

In the movie "Control Room" Lt. Josh Rushing, the Marine press spokesman whose own journey toward a nuanced understanding of the Iraq war is one of the film's most fascinating plotlines, notes that most Americans see Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict as completely different things. During the movie, and in a recent interview he gave to NPR's "Fresh Air" Rushing noted his surprise to discover that for most of the Middle East the two conflicts are intimately connected. America's failure to understand, and to address, this reality is one of the great public diplomacy fumbles of the war and the months that have followed it.

It is that sense of connection – one Lt. Rushing never understood from watching the American media, and had to travel to Qatar to learn – that brings us to the broader truth illustrated by the coverage of Arafat's funeral.

When I wrote yesterday that Arafat's real legacy is having kept the Palestinian cause on the world's agenda for the last 35 years I oversimplified. Arafat made sure the Palestinians never faded away partly by masterminding terrorism, and partly by pushing established Arab governments to lobby the West on his behalf. But more importantly he became the embodiment of Palestine, the symbolic center around which Palestinian nationalism could grow.

Most western television producers would have taken today's pictures and produced a story arc beginning with the solemnity of the funeral in Cairo and ending with the outpouring of popular feeling we saw later in the day in Ramallah. By concentrating on the events in

Ramallah, and especially on the ordinary people in the crowds gathered there, Al-Jazeera reminded us that Arafat's real power did not stem from the money or guns under his control, or the world leaders he courted and who later came to call on him. It lay in the bond he established with so many Palestinians. They knew his failings far more intimately than most, but in offering them hope – often an illusory hope, but hope nonetheless – he allowed their beleaguered community to maintain a sense of itself.

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