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OPINION

Four years since Abu Jihad's assassination

by Ghassan Bishara

Though it has been four years since Abu Jihad, a Palestine Liberation Organization leader, was assassinated in Tunisia, looking back in retrospect and measuring the level of progress in the Palestinian arena, it is as if he had just departed. On the other hand, when taking into account the other historic events that have taken place in the world, it is as if he has been absent for decades. To Palestinians, Abu Jihad was a great son of Palestine and this is why he was targeted for assassination.

The Intifada was only few months old when Abu Jihad was assassinated in his "fil kharij" (exile) home in front of his wife and one of his young daughters.

He was a man who took his responsibility seriously. As the leader within the PLO in charge of the situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or "fil dakhil" (the inside), he was the one who had fed the generation of Palestinians who were the seeds of the Intifada, which erupted Dec. 9, 1987.

From the very first day, the Intifada showed signs of promise to the Palestinians and to the stagnant and rusty Arab nation as a whole. What was most needed for the infant Intifada was the generous love and attention of the caring parents, whose main task is to nurture and prepare the new born for the extremely difficult environment awaiting it.

Abu Jihad was there to do that job. Palestinians of the Intifada saw him as the person most directly responsible for the birth of such a historical event. They soon learned to increase their trust in his instincts, and to admire and rely on his judgement.

"No voice shall drown the Intifada" was his slogan, and it was adopted by Palestinians, especially the generation of the Intifada. Modest and cool headed as he was, the Palestinian leader did not wish to take any credit for the birth of the Intifada, arguing instead that those who have been under the occupation simply could take no more pain and thus rebelled, both against the occupation and against the Arab order.

In the last interview he ever gave to a journalist -- this writer -- only a few hours before his murder in the early hours of April 16, 1988 in a peaceful neighborhood of tranquil Tunis, he insisted that the Intifada is the property of the Palestinian people, especially those of the territories. The Intifada, he said, is the direct and the only possible consequence of the conditions of the

occupation. A people, any people, can only take so much of suffering, humiliation, and denial of their humanity, he said, and then it just becomes a matter of time when they decide that the time of action has arrived; and when people reach that point, great things happen in history.

The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have taken in more than their share of pain, suffering and humiliation and Dec. 9, 1987 was their meeting with history. Abu Jihad felt quite proud of the Intifada at the time, and just like a good parent, he expected and hoped only for greatness from the infant Intifada; he did not claim credit for it, nor did he seek to control it.

It has been four years since Abu Jihad was assassinated, yet it feels to many Palestinians as if it happened yesterday. Four years are not very long, yet they are. Since 1988, the face of the world has in effect changed altogether. But the Middle East remains the same. Let us look around: Communism has become extinct, and the Soviet Union, the great military power and the most daring social experience in history, is no more. The "evil empire," as Ronald Reagan once called it, has simply faltered and "weathered away," as Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union once put it. The chaos there has reached unimaginable heights and the people of the former Soviet Union are now seeking aid from whoever will give. They have in fact already received some aid from Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In place of the Soviet Union, there are now 12 independent republics, and presently even Russia itself is about to go into pieces. Rumania's Ceausesco and East Germany's Honecker are no longer there.

The U.S. now is the only superpower but there are serious doubts as to how long it may remain as such. Noriega is in Miami, not to enjoy the sun, but to defend himself in American courts against drug dealing and other charges. South African apartheid is slowly becoming the nightmare of yesterday, and Afghanistan's victorious Mujahidine are the new masters of their country. The "religious" Saudi monarchy is assisting Russia, and buying weapons from the "infidels" in Beijing, and yes, Iraq, where history began, has been devastated and tamed after all; and Libya is next in line. Otherwise, in the Middle East, real progress is nowhere to be seen.

All of this has occurred in the four years since Abu Jihad was assassinated; and while these event were evolving, what happened with regard to the Palestinian question was meager at best, coupled with a series of retreats. Since Abu Jihad was murdered, much has happened, and yet steps which may improve the Palestinian condition have

stubbornly remained absent. The Palestinian people, through their representatives in the Palestine National Council, have recognized Israel's right to exist; U.N. resolutions 242, 338, and yes, even 181, that most hated resolution of 1947, have been accepted.

The PNC also, with a majority vote, renounced all acts of "terrorism" against Israel and accepted a solution to the conflict there based on two states, theirs to be on 22 percent of their original land, coexisting alongside a secure Israel. In appreciation of this generous Palestinian approach to the complex issue, a serious dialogue was started, not with Israel unfortunately, but with the United States; it was broken soon after.

Israel was not impressed with all of this and continued to stand by its old and known rejections. The Palestinians in the territories have had to pay with over 1,000 casualties to Israeli guns since Abu Jihad was assassinated, and two more Palestinian leaders -- Abu Iyad and Abul Howl -- have been murdered in Tunis.

Furthermore, all PLO leaders are now considered as persona-non-grata in many of the Arab states which, in the meantime, have opened their borders and hearts to the once staunchest of enemies.

In terms of achievements, the past four years since Abu Jihad was killed, have shown very little progress. Measured, thus, by the scale of that all important time, the four years have done very little, or to be precise, nothing but

regression.

Not only have three principal Palestinian leaders been cut down by their adversaries, but the few who have survived are hardly seen or heard from.

In fact, the PLO as a whole should be placed on the endangered species list; it is hardly a real factor anymore and those who claim otherwise should examine their senses. People can choose to hide their heads in the sand if they wish, but the PLO has certainly lost a lot of its edge, its stature and its importance.

The PLO dispatched diaspora Palestinians to the opening of the multilateral talks in Moscow last January, which, by the way, was financed by the Saudis, and they as well as Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip were kept out of the room. Arab money spent on the Moscow conference was not enough to buy the Palestinians a ticket to the only show in Moscow. Nor was there enough money in Lenin's capital to keep some sights open for the Palestinians to tour; the city barely has the cash to keep its transportation running and its museums open.

As a tool, Arab money, or any other money, is as important, as powerful and as potent as those who control it. The Arabs as a whole are the richest on the face of the earth, and they have failed to utilize the power of their money, and thus lost both the money and its significant properties.

An Arab recently described the rich

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Note from Al-Fajr

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