Was Yasser Arafat really poisoned? Cui prodest? Part 1

A tireless fighter for the just cause of the Palestinian people, Yasser Arafat, the former "terrorist number one", Nobel Peace Prize winner, founder and leader of the Palestinian Authority once again is in the media spotlight eight years after his life came to an end. Al Jazeera gained access to an investigation looking into the cause of his mysterious death.

"With a probability of 83 per cent he was poisoned with polonium -210." Swiss scientists made such a sensational statement upon examining the remains of the Palestinian leader. This statement made by experts raises many questions. Moreover, in October, Russian scientists also examined the remains of Arafat and found no signs of poisoning. What are the findings of Swiss experts based on? A year ago experts optimistically promised that they would need a month to determine the cause of Yasser Arafat’s death. At a recent press conference it became evident that there still wasn’t a clear answer TO THAT question. But work was delayed because there were few research materials and a good amount of time had passed since his death. "We haven’t had any biological samples obtained during President Arafat’s hospitalization, as they were destroyed after being stored for several years. I mean samples of blood, urine, blood plasma, etc. So, our job was to examine samples of the things in President Arafat’s traveling bag and those samples received during exhumation. Lastly, we cannot be certain that these samples were stored under proper conditions and were not contaminated before they came to us," - says Patrice Mangin, the Director of the Center of Forensic Medicine of the University of Lausanne.

The scandal with the polonium poisoning of Arafat broke out in July 2012. Then the TV channel Al Jazeera aired its documentary investigation about how the Palestinian leader’s death was violent. Arafat’s widow gave the journalist pajamas, toothbrush, a tube of dried pasta and cap in which Arafat spent his last hours in a Paris hospital. These items were given to radiologists in Lausanne. Then, supposedly, the remains of polonium- 210 were found on his things. In November 2012 the grave of the Palestinian leader was opened. Experts took samples of bones, hair, skin, and soil from the grave. And now, a year later, the president’s widow, Suha Arafat, said that her husband was poisoned with polonium.

Not only in Switzerland, but also in Moscow scientists were looking into the cause of Arafat’s death. Back in mid-October, the Russian Federal Medical Biological Agency which conducted their own examination did not find any traces of polonium and poisoning was ruled out as a possible explanation. In early November, the Vladimir Uiva, the agency head told reporters that. Swiss experts have found traces of polonium. But in nature there is so-called natural polonium, which accumulates in the body without poisoning. "According to all previously examined cases the average level of polonium in the bones is about 50 micro Curies. But in some samples obtained during the autopsy, the content of polonium was 900 micro Curies, which is 18 times higher than normal," - said the director of the Institute of Radiation Physics Francois Boshud.

The world first heard the word "polonium" in the sense of "poison" to kill in 2006 when a former KGB officer, Alexander Litvinenko, who was close to the fugitive oligarch Berezovsky, died under strange circumstances in London. The British police, press and politicians then rushed to place the blame. Allegedly, it was the Russian secret services. They even named a suspect, businessman, Andrei Lugovoi. Many years later, when the dust settled, it
turned out that the cause of Litvinenko’s death has not been established. On the now famous photos with a bald Litvinenko (supposedly from the polonium), he is actually bald just because a nurse shaved his head before the photo shoot. But, anyway, since then polonium is no longer simply a chemical element. It has transformed into a sort of political term that combines everything: intrigue, deceit, intelligence, and political games.

"Is it possible to rule out polonium as the cause of President Arafat’s death? The answer is no. On the other hand, if you ask us whether or not we can say with certainty that polonium is the cause of President Arafat’s death. The answer is no, too. These studies do not allow one to make such a categorical statement," - says Francois Boshud.

But Palestinians have long maintained that no matter from what the founding father of the Palestinian Authority died, the Israeli secret service is behind this. However, before the end of the investigation, Palestinian officials in interviews with journalists haven’t made any sharp statements.

The Israelis, in turn, have already responded to these assumptions made by Palestinians: look for poisoners in Ramallah, the capital of the autonomy among Arafat's inner circle. In all actuality, eight years after death it is difficult to draw any conclusions. The fact of the matter is that the half-life of polonium does not exceed 138 days, and over the past eight years the concentration on the remains and clothing has been reduced by a million times. In the well-respected medical journal, The Lancet, an article was published in which the authors claim that the results of the study of the remains and personal belongings of Arafat conducted by European scientists indicate that radioactive polonium-210 was on his personal possessions and samples of biological fluids. The authors of the material concluded that the Palestinian leader may have been poisoned with polonium. In the article with the boring name of "Improving the quality of forensic analysis of poisoning by polonium" published in the latest issue of The Lancet contains sensational conclusions: results of the study samples of personal belongings and Arafat’s bioassay "speaks in favor of the version of poisoning him with polonium -210." The authors are scientists from the Institute of Radio Physics and the University Centre for forensic examination in Lausanne, Switzerland (CHUV). Their preliminary findings last year formed the basis of the acclaimed documentary on Al Jazeera about the true cause of death of the first President of the Palestinian National Authority. At this time, Swiss scientists are giving these findings more details and providing further evidence of their original hypothesis. The 75 year-old Arafat died in December 2004 in a hospital near Paris. As stated in an article in The Lancet, the first symptoms of the disease appeared on October 12th of that year: nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhea. "Shortly thereafter, the general state of his health began to deteriorate with symptoms of gastric illness grew but there was no inflammation or fever. His condition worsened until kidney failure and neurological coma. He was transferred to the intensive care unit where he died of a brain hemorrhage. Although numerous clinical and toxicological studies were conducted, the cause of the sickness still remains unknown".

(To be continued...)

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