

Senior PLO official and veteran negotiator Saeb Erekat dies of COVID-19

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Photo taken on March 3, 2020, shows Saeb Erekat, secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). (Photo: AFP)

Ramallah, November 10 (RHC)-- Senior Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) official and veteran Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat has died of COVID-19. He died on Tuesday at the age of 65. He had been put in a medically-induced coma in an Israeli hospital in October.

Erekat's infection was complicated by a history of health ailments. He underwent a lung transplant in 2017 and suffered from a weak immune system and a bacterial infection in addition to his latest struggle with the coronavirus.

In August, Erekat was among the most critical voices of the U.S.-sponsored normalization deals that saw the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain establish ties with the Israeli regime. He described the deal as "the birth of Arab Zionism" and called the agreement "a poisoned dagger stabbed into the Palestinians' back."

Erekat was witness to Israeli atrocities since an early age. He was just 12 when Israeli tanks rolled into his hometown of Jericho (Ariha). He also witnessed the 1967 Israeli war against neighboring Arab states that lasted only six days but shaped the entire Middle East in the decades to come.

Erekat said he had to grow up quickly under the Israeli occupation in the West Bank. His first arrest at the age of 13 was not his last.

He attended university in the United States and moved to Britain to complete a Ph.D. degree in conflict resolution. It marked the beginning of his struggle for Palestinian statehood through negotiation — advocating a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders — that eventually proved futile.

Erekat emerged as the chief Palestinian negotiator in 1995 and one of the most recognizable PLO representatives tolerated by the Tel Aviv regime over the decades. He also served as a senior adviser to former PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and current President Mahmoud Abbas.

Over the years though, Erekat described a growing pessimism at Israel's failure to deliver on its pledges, and criticized the building of yet more illegal Israeli settlements, the increasing numbers of checkpoints, persisting brutality against Palestinians, and the Israeli separation wall now more than 700 kilometers long.

He later turned his attention to the United Nations and was instrumental in the successful campaign to gain observer status for the State of Palestine within the UN. It was part of a strategy to force the Israeli regime to face trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) as an occupying force.

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