

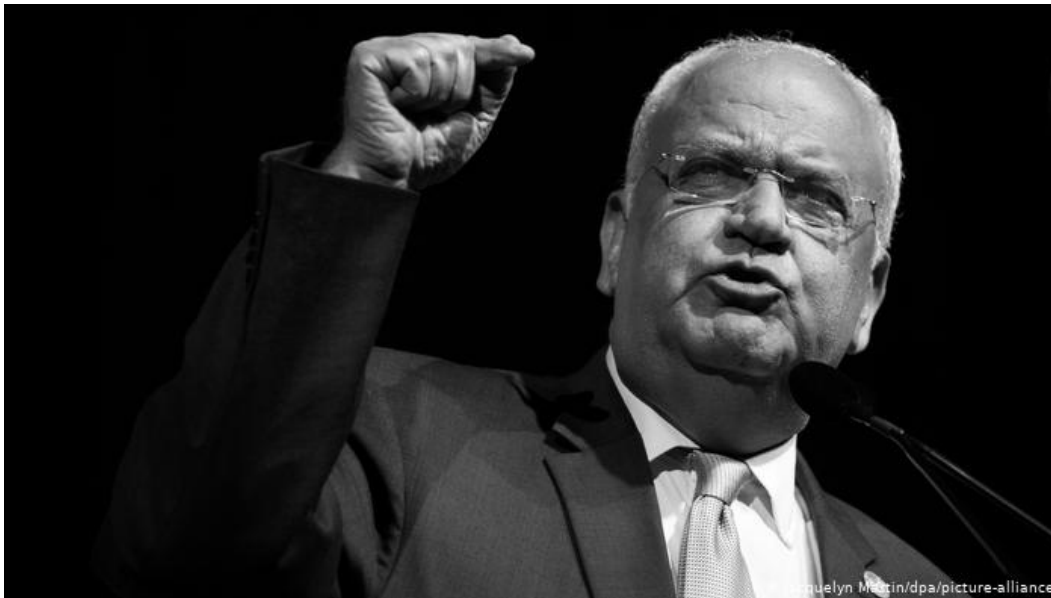


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NEWS

Saeb Erekat dies after coronavirus infection

Veteran peace negotiator Saeb Erekat was one of the Palestinians' most prominent figures in recent decades. He was hospitalized with COVID-19 in October.



Saeb Erekat, a veteran negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), has died from complications from COVID-19, Palestinian party Fatah announced on Tuesday.

Erekat, 65, was one of the Palestinians' most prominent figures in recent decades, serving as a senior negotiator with Israel and making frequent media appearances. He was also a senior adviser to the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and current President Mahmoud Abbas.

He was involved in nearly every round of negotiations between Israel and Palestine since 1991 and was a tireless advocate of the two-state solution.

Several senior PLO officials have been diagnosed with COVID-19, including central committee member Azzam al-Ahmad and social development minister Ahmed Majdalani.

Erekat, who was also secretary general of the PLO, was being treated in the coronavirus intensive care unit of Jerusalem's Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital with severe respiratory problems after being transferred from the West Bank in October.

He was placed on a ventilator and put into a medically induced coma last month.

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He underwent lung-transplant surgery in the United States in 2017.

There had been some small demonstrations outside the hospital, with hardline Israeli Jews opposed to Israeli doctors treating Erekat.

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Critical of Netanyahu

DW spoke to Erekat in May, where he was deeply critical of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's expansion of building illegal settlements.

"I have done my best to achieve peace with Israel, but there came a prime minister in Israel and a president of the United States who torpedoed every effort to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians," he told DW at the time.

"I told Palestinians, once you recognize Israel, once you renounce violence, once you sit and negotiate, you will have an independent state. And now Netanyahu is coming up with a map to annex 94% of my constituency," he said at the time.

"Do you think I can leave the house to face my people, my constituents, who believed in me (...). I am going to be quarantined politically for the rest of my life. I'll be used as an example in books and lectures and in children's books. So, do you think there will be a Palestinian in the next hundred years who will sit with the Israelis and repeat what I did?"

His death comes at a time when there is little prospect of a political solution for the Palestinians, especially in view of the difficult relations with the current US administration.

After Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's sole capital at the end of 2017, the Palestinian leadership broke off diplomatic relations. Then, at the beginning of 2020, the new US plan led to renewed tensions, as the plan primarily favored the Israeli position.

'Great loss'

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said in a statement that "the departure of a brother and a friend, of the great fighter, Dr. Saeb Erekat, is a great loss for Palestine and our people, and we are deeply saddened."

Abbas declared a three-day mourning period.

Erekat's family said in a statement: "Saeb lived a life full of thought, love, forgiveness and peace and he will be dearly missed."

"Saeb has shown an extraordinary patience and resilience, with the same determination that has characterized his career to achieve freedom for Palestine and a just and lasting peace in our region."

Former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who negotiated with Erekat in the 2000s, said she was "saddened" by his death and offered her condolences.

She said in a tweet that Erekat had texted her after falling ill, saying "I'm not finished with what I was born to do."

Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli Cabinet minister and peace negotiator, said Erekat's death was "a big loss for those who believe in peace, both on the Palestinian side and the Israeli side."

aw/rt (AP, AFP, dpa)