

Fatah: arm of the Arab people

Nick Medvecky

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Editors' Note: Nick Medvecky, former News Editor for the WSU *South End*, is currently touring the Middle East and will send back periodic on-the-spot reports from his travels.

He will visit Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Israel visiting with revolutionaries, student groups and government officials.

(Special to the Fifth Estate)

AMMAN, Jordan—We had left Amman at 9 am and after going through a number of military and police checkpoints, all of which allowed us to proceed once we produced our papers from Al Fatah, we stopped at a gray stone building somewhere in the narrow winding streets of Salt, Jordan.

Abdeen Jabara, a Detroit lawyer and myself had been over here touring in the Middle-East with Al Fatah, the Arab guerrilla organization, for two weeks now.

As we waited for our Fedayin guerrilla guide, who had disappeared into the building, we sat in the back of the vehicle that carried us here and watched in the sweltering heat as the merchants and street vendors busily carted their wares to and fro. Small donkeys appeared to be the principle mode of transporting goods inside this village. I could easily imagine Christ being lost in this scene.

After a few minutes our guide came back through the iron gates of the building and motioned for us to come in.

Yasser Arafat, the leader of the largest Palestinian resistance organization, Al Fatah, is perhaps one of the most controversial figures in the world today.

If Arafat is the most beloved and respected man in the Arab world, he is also the most feared and hated by the Israelis I've spoken to. In the homes of the Arab peoples I've visited and interviewed throughout Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, his picture has replaced the religious symbols and photos of such men as President Nasser of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan.

As we walked inside I could see that this structure must be some sort of Command Post. Fedayin were busy everywhere and never without their weapons (Kalashnikov machine-guns, for the most part). As I was led into a small room with a large veranda overlooking the city, my eyes quickly scanned the area in anticipation of greeting this man who is now a world-wide legend.

Inside, four or five young men stood up to greet us and from over a desk littered with maps and papers a short balding man smiled broadly and stretched out his hand toward us.

As I reached for his hand I realized that this was indeed Yasser Arafat. After introductions to all of the people present we were served very hot and sweet tea in small glasses, no doubt a cultural leftover of the former British colonial rule.

Arafat's wearing a well-worn green uniform with pistol and ammo belt. He speaks very slowly and soft-spokenly in good English.

Around his neck he wears a Fatah "dog-tag". It reads "O + 1 Fat'h". The O+ indicates the blood type, and the numeral indicates the order in which the individual's turn to donate blood comes up (our guide's number was 763).

Whatever he deserves in the way of hatred or love is certainly closely connected to how one identifies with the Arab-Israeli Conflict, and one's feelings toward Al Fatah, the organization which Arafat played a large role in creating.

During the course of this all too brief interview Arafat mentioned that he was very familiar with the WSU South End and that he was pleased with the informational work that it had accomplished.

As we were scheduled to have a full interview at a later time I only asked him a couple of general questions. As it turned out later we never did see each other again, as shortly after this meeting the fire at the Al Aksa Mosque occurred and Arafat had to leave for Cairo to attend a meeting of the Palestinian National Congress.

In a March 6, 1969 interview in the *Washington Post*, I told him, the Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr. Abba Eben stated, "Arab governments established these organizations. Without Arab governments they would have neither weapons nor support. The mastery still belongs to the Arab governments. If Nasser or Hussein decided to negotiate peace, I believe these movements would dwindle at the negotiating stage and fade away at the settlement stage...I think the governments still retain executive control. The Fatah is simply a convenience for Arab governments which do not want to fight with their regular armies and yet do not want a period of tranquility leading to peace."

I asked for his comments on Eben's view especially since the Israeli leaders outspokenly declare that they hit civilian targets in the Arab countries (such as the Beirut airport in Lebanon, and the Ghor canal in Jordan) in order to put pressure on the Arab governments to suppress the guerrilla groups.

Arafat stated, "He's a liar. We are here."

He went on to explain that Eben clearly knows that the movement's support comes from the people, the Palestinian people specifically and the Arab peoples in general. The Arab governments do their best to suppress and control these movements, but that they continue to build and broaden their base directly among the people.

"The revolution is a fact when we are among our people. The true revolution is among us and the Arabic peoples," he further stated.

Arafat himself, a Civil Engineer and self-made revolutionary, had fought against the birth of an exclusive Jewish State in Palestine as a youth of 17 in 1948, and again in Egypt in 1956.

Greatly disenchanted with the conduct of the Palestinian and general Arab response to this State, he helped to found the Al Fatah in 1958.

For the first seven years they primarily operated as a clandestine political group. On January 1, 1965, they launched Al Assifa. But it wasn't until after the defeat of the Arab armies in the Six-Day War of June, 1967, that they really got off the ground.

With the Israeli forces at home and drunk with victory and the Arab armies at home drunk with defeat, the battlefields were left alone and unattended for the most part.

Arafat and his co-leaders conferred and subsequently they suspended military operations for a period of six weeks while mass recruitment brought in over 3,000 new Fedayin and a top priority was given to "policing-up" the discarded arms on the battlefields. They quickly ran into trouble with the Arab leaders who attempted to block these actions. The response of the Arab regimes up to that time had been to suppress, on the one hand, any independence of action of the Palestinian forces and, on the other, to deal with their own social problems by directing reactionary actions against Israel.

In the past these Arab regimes could and did deal with the Fedayin by imprisoning them and even in shooting them down.

However, because of their recent defeat the Arab regimes were faced with the direct fear of social revolutions and/or political coups in their respective countries.

Faced with the massive support of their populations of Al Fatah, and the direct rank-and-file rapport that Fatah had achieved with the armies, the Arab leaders were forced to make a deal with Al Fatah to "allow" them to keep the small arms in return for the heavy equipment.

In the two years since the Six-Day War Al Fatah has succeeded in building total support among the Palestinian refugees (over 1,600,000), massive support amongst the Arab populations, the ability to operate freely and inde-

pendently within the states of Jordan and Syria (and quickly moving to that position in Lebanon), and in uniting almost all of the groups into the Armed Struggle Command.

Most important out of all of this is the fact that Israel's military and political leaders now face an independent Palestinian entity under the leadership of Palestinians for the first time.

As we were talking, a young Fedayin in a camouflage uniform (standard dress) and wearing a pistol and ammo belt walked in to pick up some medical supplies for his "front-line" post. Arafat introduced him to me and commented that the young fighter was only 14 years old and was a full member of Al Assifa. As I briefly interviewed him he explained that he takes full part in military operations and has the same responsibilities and duties as any other Fedayin.

Although it was not unusual to find young boys in Fatah, I did find it unusual to find them in Al Assifa. Boys from the age of 10 to 14 and from 15 to 17 were in groups called "Ashbal", or "Lion Cubs".

These were formerly the Boy Scouts and now they receive military, physical and political training in special camps near to where they live. In order to qualify they must be attending regular school and reports from the school authorities and from their parents are regularly made. Attendance is voluntary.

In my travels throughout the Arab countries I found that Fatah recruitment offices demand that the individual at least finish high school and that all new recruits spend 9 months to a year in a non-military wing of Al Fatah. This, they say, weeds out the religious and emotional "fanatics", and properly allows time to educate the youth to why and for what is he fighting.

When I explained to Arafat that in many discussions that I've had with individuals concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict many people claim that the Arabs only want to "throw the Jews into the sea," as manifested in one form or another, by certain Arab leaders.

"Our aim," Arafat replied, "is to create a democratic Palestinian State in which Jews, Christians and Moslems can live in peace and justice equally." He explained that it is not Fatah's wish to kick out anybody, only to live freely and equally together.

Fatah rejects as also reactionary the maintenance of an exclusive Jewish State. They point out that it is precisely the call for a Jewish State and the exclusion of the Arab (Palestinian) people from their homes that is at the heart of the conflict.

Arafat emphatically states that the Palestinian people are fighting for equal rights to their homeland and that, as things now stand, they "have nothing to lose but our lives. We know that the way is not easy—difficult—long—but it will be our victory."

Before we broke up the interview, and in reference to a question I asked him concerning Fatah's actual military worth, he carefully ticked off the names of 13 towns spread out the full length of Israel where Fatah had had operations the night before (all military targets).

After leaving Arafat and the city of Salt we traveled up to the front line areas and visited a guerrilla encampment.

With trenches and anti-aircraft guns set up under a grove of olive trees we sat in a semi-circle with ten or so commandos and discussed their hopes and aspirations for the future.

One of the Fedayin (they were all under 25) declared, "We are not terrorists, not destroyers. We only want to return to our lands."

After a short while he asked Abdeen why I had not written it down. I explained that I had encountered that very same statement hundreds of times, that I had written it down many times, and that I was convinced that they truly believed it.

And so it was wherever I went throughout the Arab world I saw full evidence of the strength and determination of the Palestinian people. For two years now a totally new development has grasped the minds and hearts of these peoples.

A social revolution, not for one state but all states, and not for one people but all people.

As I left the Arab countries and moved on to Israel I went with a firm conviction; that the Palestinians fully believe in their struggle, and that their children are being taught its goals and ideals.

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