

YOU WOULD HAVE TO HAVE BEEN AN OUTRIGHT PESSIMIST NOT TO HAVE applauded the mesmerising spectacle on the White House lawn last September when representatives of the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation signed their peace agreement. Surely no one could pretend that something of vital relevance had not taken place that day.

Yet, what seems to have passed largely unnoticed by everyone is that Israel may have signed a peace agreement with a phantom organisation — for the PLO, in every sense of the word, no longer exists.

There was a time, of course, when the PLO did indeed exist and did indeed, for as long as a quarter century, legitimately represent the aspirations of the Palestinian people. This legitimacy derived from three sources: the power that the PLO's armed fighters and militias projected, the ubiquity of the PLO's popular institutions, and the genuine support that virtually every segment of Palestinian society extended to it.

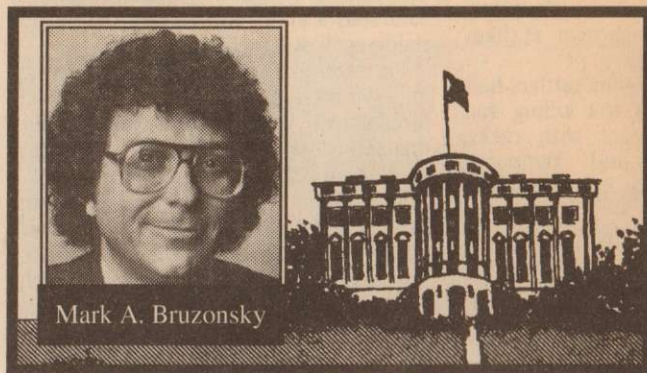
The military forces, as will be recalled, were disbanded and expelled from Beirut in 1982, and later dispersed to such far away places as Yemen, Algeria and Sudan. Over the years, large numbers of these combatants have resettled elsewhere, mostly in the Gulf countries, where they have found gainful employment, or in their original Arab host states, where they have rejoined their families.

The various institutions, both social and political, that the PLO operated all those years have also totally collapsed. Social institutions such as the Palestine Red Crescent, the Samed Society, the Souk Al-Gharb Foundation, the Palestine Research Centre and the Palestine National Fund, had respectively offered adequate health care, employment opportunities, educational facilities, academic grants and social services to hundreds of thousands of grateful Palestinians, both in exile and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

And political institutions — for the most part democratic — had made it possible for Palestinians of all stripes to have their voices heard without having their heads hit, as often happens in ... patriarchal societies of the Arab World.

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From



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Washington

And, of course, there was the Palestine National Council, the parliament-in-exile, the ultimate Palestinian political institution, whose many sessions since 1965 had brought together a representative sampling of the various stratifications of class, ideological currents and political sensibilities that existed in Palestinian society.

All of these institutions closed down soon after the conclusion of the Coalition War when the PLO began, very simply, to go broke.... The PLO could no longer meet its obligation to these groups which, soon thereafter, atrophied and simply ceased to function.

Finally, there is the erosion of popular support for the PLO among the mainstream, an erosion tied to the sneaking suspicion of Palestinians everywhere that, over the years, their leadership had all along been, or at least had progressively become, only remotely connected to the realities of Palestinian life. Instead of bringing to an end the unspeakable pain and destitution that had characterised the life of the overwhelming majority of Palestinians, this leadership rather brought one diplomatic defeat after another, one military disaster after another and one act of social grief after another.

For example, the expulsion of over 400,000 Palestinians from Kuwait, an event that has caused severe disruptions in the lives of three times as many other Palestinians, is linked inextricably to the bumbling position of the PLO on the Coalition War.

The PLO today could not even be called a mere ghost of its old self. It just does not exist anymore. The three or four major factions that had belonged to it and given it the appearance of being an umbrella organisation, have long since walked out. Fatah, the largest and most influential voice in the organisation, is torn by dissension. So many members of the executive committee have resigned, in-

clusion of the Palestinians by Zionism

It was not a book one easily forgot.

And Fawaz is not a person one forgets.

Today, in the 1990s, in the wake of the Labour Party-Fatah deal and with his newest book — *Exile's Return* — soon to become available from a major American publishing house, Fawaz still personifies, even more than in the past, the predicament of the Palestinians.

Some months ago I ran into Fawaz on the street, near Dupont Circle.

Strolling along and needing a lift — he's never owned a car...doesn't even know how to drive — there he was in baggy jeans, leather jacket, long dishevelled hair and beard.

Outwardly there wasn't much change to be seen...not at first glance anyway.

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cluding such prominent figures as poet-laureate Mahmoud Darwish and Shafik Al-Hout, that this body no longer holds meetings.

If the PLO exists at all, its existence is embodied in the person of Yasser Arafat and a couple of dozen men around him now sitting in Tunis dreaming dreams of glory about how they, with help from a "strong police force", would soon be running the autonomy show from Jericho and Gaza.

Rejectionists in Palestinian society, not all of whom are fundamentalists or radicals, point to how Arafat and his few loyalists have, in effect, drafted a peace agreement in Oslo behind the backs of their people and finally signed it on the White House lawn without consulting or convening the Palestine National Council — a clear constitutional violation.

The exile community, four million strong, feel betrayed and abandoned. Other Palestinians, especially those whose husbands, sons or fathers had given their lives for the cause and had been dependent for a living on their social security cheques from the PLO all these years, have been pauperised.

Palestinian democrats, certainly those amongst them who had struggled hard to shift Palestinian popular culture away from patriarchal norms, feel enraged at seeing their ideas thrown out of the window, like broken toys, by a few posturing officials and a vaudevillian Arafat.

It is of vital importance not only to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza but also to Palestinians in exile that this experiment in self-rule, and potential statehood, succeed. It is crucial for those of us in the Diaspora to know that one day, if we are again placed close to the door for easy eviction from Kuwait, if again the frenzied packs come to our refugee camps, if again officials in our host states begin to snarl at our heels, we will have a little strip of earth somewhere that we can go to where we can feel safe with kith

and kin.

Palestinian culture is still irreducibly set in its ways, its posited truths still as old as Old Jerusalem and as avowedly traditional as the muezzin's call to prayer. Yet today, for the first time in their history, the Palestinians will embark on a new journey that will thrust them beyond their fixed meaning and enable them to enter the global dialogue of cultures.

Thus, this is a project related vitally to the very destiny of the Palestinian people. It is a turning point in their history and, this time, they have to turn with it. They cannot afford to throw furtive glances over their shoulders or to resurrect from the attic of their past struggle any of the tawdry slogans that the PLO had coined for them.

Alas, the PLO, or those remnants of it sitting around Tunis today, will soon enshrine themselves in the West Bank and Gaza and continue to call themselves the "sole, official representative of the Palestinian people".

I, for one, am convinced that no one there will listen to them. No one listened to the Arab Higher Committee either after 1948 when a new generation of Palestinians living the realities of a new order, stepped up to it toe-to-toe, belly-to-belly, and told it to pick up anchor and fade away.

Now another generation of Palestinians, all in their twenties and early thirties, all cut from the same quarry of shared struggle and kinship of vision, will as surely come forward and tell those self-styled "sole, official representatives" to move on.

True, you would have to be an outright pessimist not to have seen what was signed on the White House lawn last September as an agreement of the first magnitude. But you would also have to be somewhat gifted with self-deception to believe that the PLO, already a phantom organisation, will be an instrument of that agreement's implementation.

his name, had done that to him ... and to me.

There's more to be said about all this — a little political paradigm of life in this modern day imperial capital — in future columns.

And Fawaz himself has a lot to say about all that's happened to him...and to his people...more than ever.

But for this moment, however, just the following information.

Fawaz Turki, one of the most interesting and important Palestinian literary personalities of the era, is a homeless man.

Yes.... Homeless.

No...not the "homelessness" of statelessness — the condition in which he has lived all his life and which he has written about so movingly all his adult years.

But real homelessness. He has no place to live, no source of income, no help from other Palestinians, no way of participating in the events of the day.

Except that is...for "words". For Fawaz's medium has

paper or record.

So for the moment, here's an advance peek at what this exceptionally gifted, independent, iconoclastic, soul-searching, Palestinian writer-intellectual, has to say about recent events and which all in Washington will soon be reading:

As these "words" — "words are all I have", Fawaz explains in his new book — resonate around political Washington, the situation in Israel and the occupied territories of Palestine will no doubt continue to convulse and throb. With Israel's Labour Party, the rump PLO of Yasser Arafat, and the omnipresent Americans working feverishly to try to breath life into an agreement which is essentially one of putting the Palestinians on self-government reservations, such "words" convey crucial human realities that go beyond money and guns.

More about Fawaz, and more about Yasser Arafat whom Fawaz spent a number of intense weeks with just a few years ago, in an upcoming column.

Jordan nervous as PLO nears reality of accord

By Rana Sabbagh

JORDAN, UNDER INTENSE US pressure to normalise ties with Israel, is watching nervously for unwanted side-effects of the Palestinian entity about to emerge next door. Jordanian apprehension grew as hints appeared of an Israeli delay in the scheduled December 13 start of withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and West Bank town of Jericho under the Israeli-PLO self-rule deal.

"Any failures or snags in implementing self-rule will make its weight felt over here because of our strong political, economic, geographic and demographic links," said one official.

The Israeli-PLO deal has already disrupted economic and political life in Jordan, where about half its four million people are of Palestinian origin. Uncertainty over future economic ties with the West Bank has depressed real estate business and paralysed Amman's stock market, once among the most active in the region.

At the political level, the emergence of Palestine as an independent power has stripped Jordan of its traditional pivotal role in delivering Mid-east peace. "It is now obvious that Jordan does not have a major role in the peace settlement," said Amman-based economist Riad Khoury. "Its role is going to be small."

For Jordanian security officials, the worst scenario is Palestinian conflicts in the occupied territories between supporters and opponents of the accord, spilling over into Jordanian areas populated by Palestinians. "Tension is contagious. Frustration and despair only breed violence and counter-violence," one security officer said.

In Jordan, where the government is pursuing peace with Israel despite much popular scepticism, a failure in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process could undermine its own efforts. "Failure in imple-

menting it will inflict psychological defeat on our people," said another senior official. "It will affect the mood on other Israeli-Arab tracks, by showing that agreements with Israel are not durable because they failed to stick to the first accord that had a timetable."

Amman is under strong US pressure to sign a separate treaty with Israel, and initialled an agenda on September 14 giving the basis for a future settlement. But Jordan, officially committed to a regional settlement, cannot move too quickly without Syrian and Lebanese progress in their talks with Israel.

In the meantime, Jordan is trying to clarify the future of its economic ties with both Israel and the Palestinians. A second round of Israeli-Jordanian economic talks produced the first dividends this month — agreement on reopening West Bank branches of Jordanian banks that closed after the 1967 war. However, large areas remain in dispute, especially Jordan's hope to export goods to the West Bank without duty. Israel, which will continue to control the border, has never allowed Jordanian imports.

Jordan and the PLO are also working on a formal agreement on future economic ties, but a draft accord reached in October remains unratified. "We have to find a mechanism to control and organise relations between Jordan and the PLO, which have become very unstable," said member of parliament Abdul Karim Kabariti.

Jordanians fear that an expected flood of money from foreign donors to a new Palestinian government, which will operate initially with Jordanian dinars, could create economic problems for Jordan.

Amman also wants to resolve the question of refugees, demanding that Israel honour UN resolutions requiring that Palestinians forced from their homes in 1967 be allowed home and those who left in 1948 be given the choice of return or compensation.—REUTERS