

THE PRESS AND THE NATION RISE AND FALL TOGETHER

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## PLO's disarray reflected in Washington

From MARK A. BRUZONSKY

WASHINGTON, April 30: Signs of the PLO's disarray and confusion are evident not only throughout the Middle East, but in Washington as well. When the Arab League held an unprecedented three-day international symposium here last week on the specific subject of Israel's settlements in the occupied territories, the PLO was all but a ghost.

Even the PLO's controversial Director of what is officially termed the Palestine Information Office, Hassan Rahman, had to cajole his way to a seat at the podium for one of the lunch sessions and to read a letter during one of the panels. He was not listed on the official programme. Mrs. Rahman was overheard telling a friend, "Hassan had to fight very hard" even for this small amount of recognition.

Moreover, not a single big name Palestinian personality was in attendance. One of the most senior and well-respected Palestinian-Americans here, when asked

why, said he wasn't even told about the conference until the week it began.

Whatever reasons or excuses are offered by the Arab League, a large part of the story—and one that is usually not discussed in print—is the chaotic state of Palestinian affairs in this capital.

Former Arafat supporters known to still have warm personal regard for the old man have been overheard terming him a "fool" in the way he has handled Palestinian politics in recent months. And the de facto Washington representative of the PLO, Rahman, has a reputation more as a playboy and Arafat-lackey than as a serious player in Washington's social and political circles.

The latest Washington episode in the decline and possible fall of the PLO has to do with the annual conference of the National Association of Arab-Americans.

An establishment organisation that has developed a reputation of hardly being in the forefront of serious struggle in recent years, the NAAA nevertheless remains one of the few important Arab-American forums and voices in the

U.S.

During its entire 3-days—and even with a panoply of notable international personalities such as Lord Caradon, Sean MacBride, Vanessa Redgrave, Chedli Klibi, Jesse Jackson and Bruno Kreisky—the Arab League was not able to produce a single American politician. NAAA, on the other hand, for whatever reasons, is at least on Washington's political map and was addressed last year by Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy.

According to one of NAAA's senior officials, Ron Cathell, the NAAA invited Yasser Arafat to address this year's annual conference by TV hook-up from the Middle East. King Hussein has accepted the organisation's invitation, according to Cathell, but Yasser Arafat has declined, thus passing up a special opportunity to provide a much-needed presence, even if electronically, for the PLO and to explain his outlook and ideas before a sympathetic American audience.

When queried about all this, Hassan Rahman was not able to

provide any insights, other than to indicate that the Chairman is "very busy with many important matters" and probably would not be at a suitable location at the time he was invited to appear by satellite-hookup.

Asked again if they had remained in contact with Arafat and tried to convince him to appear, Cathell responded that they were relying on Rahman to do so. Privately, it seems likely, however, that NAAA has little expectation that Rahman will come through, and this result might actually be welcome because not everyone in NAAA is enthusiastic about the invitation in the first place—indeed, the organisation has taken on something of a pro-Phalange, anti-Palestinian tinge in recent years.

And so this coming weekend, one of the leading Arab-American organisations will again gather in Washington and the PLO will miss one more opportunity to present its case and attract some positive commentary. At the rate things are coming apart, there may

not be many opportunities left.

Final Note: Whatever the inner intrigues concerning this story, the NAAA has acted quickly to cover its bases. When queried about this column just before publication, another official of NAAA, Maria Segal, indicated that it was not true that an official invitation had ever been extended to Yasser Arafat. Rather, she indicated, that possibility had been discussed and Ron Cathell may well have thought that Arafat had been invited, but the invitation was never made. She indicated the PLO would be represented by Hassan Rahman speaking at a panel on the West Bank. Then Ron Cathell indicated that he had checked further and "there had been a real screw-up... somebody dropped the ball... whoever was supposed to follow-up the invitation didn't... someone is going to be held responsible". Cathell noted that "everyone had been very enthusiastic about inviting Arafat," but when queried why someone doesn't just pick up the phone today and see if Arafat is able to appear, he had no answer and made it obvious no one was planning to do so.