

Seekers of identity and inheritance

THE SITUATION FOR YASSER Arafat is a bit incongruous at the moment. He travels from capital to capital receiving the trappings of a head of state and the accolades of Western politicians.

But in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan — the very places where the PLO was once strongest — he is increasingly castigated and vilified.

And the situation for Fawaz Turki is also a bit incongruous.

His latest book, *Exile's Return*, will soon be published — he is probably best known for his first book published in the 1970s, *The Disinherited*.

But thanks to Chairman Arafat's abandonment of various responsibilities he had to a variety of Palestinian institutions, including the one that funded Fawaz, my old friend is reduced to a kind

From



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Washington

of vagabond existence at the moment.

It was just a few years ago Chairman Arafat invited writer Turki to Tunis. He gave him quite unprecedented access to his inner circle and invited him to travel in the Mid-east with him attending all his meetings for about a week.

Westerners had written laudatory books about the chairman in the past. Now, it seems, the chairman thought it might be a good idea for a Palestinian writer, especially one who writes in English, to do so as well.

Fawaz wrote and wrote. And in the end the chairman came out looking pretty good. But Fawaz himself was not very pleased, he knew even then that something was amiss, and the book never did get published. There were already at the time seeds of considerable doubt not only about Chairman Arafat, but about the entire PLO as it has evolved over the past decade.

A few weeks ago Fawaz wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post*. It was a bit "restrained". He showed it to me while *Washington's* main newspaper was considering it. And he admitted to me that he had pulled a few punches concluding that

he had to hold back for an American audience, as well as to get his words even before an American audience.

So I asked Fawaz, as he moves from place to place these days, if he wouldn't jot down his more unrestrained thoughts about Chairman Arafat and recent events at this particularly historic turning point.

Fawaz Turki is himself a rather dispirited man at the moment. His latest new book — a gut-wrenching chronicle of the state of the Palestinian people and the realities of the PLO was written before the political earthquake of last September, making it all the more credible. It will be available next month. For anyone trying to appreciate the realities of the Palestinian predicament today it should be must reading.

The following are his views of the chairman and his struggle.

The chairman's audience

By Fawaz Turki

SOME YEARS BACK YASSER Arafat served me a cup of tea with honey.

I was seated next to him on his private plane, a small Falcon, as it headed on its way from Tunis to Kuwait. The chairman of the PLO was going there to head the Palestinian delegation to the OIC summit conference. I was going there with him, after he had promised me unprecedented access, in order to record the happenings of a week in the life of a Palestinian revolutionary leader.

In those days a great many of us Palestinians still thought of him in these terms. He has, after all, been our leader for as long as a quarter century. We knew him as a man of uncompromising principles. We referred to him, often engagingly, as Al-Khatyar, The Old Man, or as Abu Ammar, the "Building Father".

We all trusted him. Some of us revered him. And only a very few dared to criticise him.

On the plane with us were two American journalists whom Arafat talked to incessantly and charmed with his famous ready smile. The journalists, un-

characteristically, chose to be good listeners rather than challenge him with probing questions — perhaps because the Palestinian leader has a severe cold and seemed unsteady of gait.

Arafat loves American journalists. If you happen to be that kind of journalist, benign and unthreatening, he loves the media.

To tell you the truth, I was enchanted too. I was proud of my encounter with the chairman. I was even proud when I woke up in my hotel room the following day to discover that I had picked up his cold.

Now, however, I ask myself, in the cold light of hindsight, what is the point of all that charm and all these ready smiles? What do we care whether Yasser Arafat is delightful company or not?

The question really is: Where is the beef?

We are asking this: What could this generation of Palestinians, after three decades of sacrifice, of living pain beyond all rational understanding under occupation, of unspeakable destitution in exile, expect to get out of the agreement that PLO officials signed on the White House

lawn last September? Does it guarantee us, truly guarantee us, anything beyond Jericho, a dusty outpost by the Dead Sea, and beyond Gaza, a nowhere strip of land by the Mediterranean?

I, for one, will not be impressed by the facile slogan of "Jericho-Gaza First" until I am assured of what will come second, third and last. Since I don't see any evidence to assure me, I fear we may have been taken for a ride.

And if indeed we have been taken for a ride, this represents the cruelest irony of them all — we have been abandoned, yet again, by our very own leaders.

Alas, it appears that we Palestinians ... have not learnt any of the lessons from the struggle of the 1930s and 1940s.

Is it any wonder then that no history in the world has repeated itself as Palestinian history has?

The PLO has always taken the people for granted. Its functionaries have used them, exploited them, and finally betrayed them. And the Palestinians, incredibly enough, have chosen not to stand up to them.

That is the sad truth about Palestinian

history, Palestinian politics and Palestinian popular culture. We have been nurtured on the ethics of fear, especially fear of authority figures. We live in a society so broken in back and spirit that we acquiesce in the forfeiture of our self-determination to a handful of rulers.

That is why this handful of rulers ... went to Oslo and then to Washington to sign an agreement that in effect aims at placing on reservations — no other word will do here — no less than one and a half million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

What group of Palestinian intellectuals has stepped up to this handful of rulers, toe-to-toe, belly-to-belly, and asked it to explain what it has bargained or signed away?

We just cannot remain unconcerned about what is going on around us. Men are implicated in that which leaves them indifferent. Those who do not take an active part in political life give, by their indifference, their approval to the prevailing order.

We have to speak up or forever be damned.