



ARAFAT
AND THE
DREAM
OF
PALESTINE

AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT

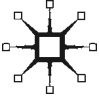
BASSAM ABU SHARIF

ARAFAT
AND THE
DREAM
OF
PALESTINE

AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT

BASSAM ABU SHARIF

palgrave
macmillan



ARAFAT AND THE DREAM OF PALESTINE
Copyright © Bassam Abu Sharif, 2009.
All rights reserved.

All photographs are printed courtesy of Bassam Abu Sharif.

Map of the Middle East is reprinted courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

First published in 2009 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60801-6

ISBN-10: 0-230-60801-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Abu Sharif, Bassam.

Arafat and the dream of Palestine : an insider's account / Bassam Abu Sharif.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-230-60801-9

1. Arafat, Yasir, 1929-2004. 2. Heads of state—Palestine—Biography. 3. Munazzamat al-Tahrir al-Filastiniyah—Biography. 4. Palestinian Arabs—Biography. 5. Arab-Israeli conflict. 6. Abu Sharif, Bassam. I. Title.
DS126.6.A67A6 2009

956.95'3044092—dc22

[B]

2008054700

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Letra Libre, Inc.

First edition: May 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

CONTENTS

<i>Key Terms and Organizations</i>	v
<i>Principal Characters</i>	ix
<i>PLO Chart</i>	xii
<i>Map</i>	xiii
<i>Prologue</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1. The Rise of Yasser Arafat	9
2. Black September	17
3. Hijacked!	25
4. Arafat's Escape	31
5. War and Pieces of the Middle East	37
6. Book Bomb	45
7. Steadfastness and Confrontation	53
8. Reagan's Broken Promise	61
9. Invasion	69
10. Military Ethics Breached	73
11. Walid Jumblatt's Message	79
12. A Close Call	83
13. Practical Solutions to Impractical Problems	87
14. The Soviet Invitation	91
15. The Storming of Beirut	97
16. A Terrorist at Buckingham Palace	101
17. Tension with Syria	109

18.	A Dangerous Journey	121
19.	Getting the Truth Out	125
20.	India Loves You	135
21.	The Handshake	139
22.	Almost Deported	147
23.	Lost in Translation	151
24.	Children of the Stones	157
25.	A Political Bomb	163
26.	The Abu Sharif Document	169
27.	Give Peace a Visa	179
28.	The Difference a Paragraph Can Make	187
29.	The Ambassador's Lost Opportunity	193
30.	The Power of an Embrace	199
31.	Two Wagers	205
32.	U.S. Trap	211
33.	Last-Minute Modifications	219
34.	Love and Hate	225
35.	Under Siege	235
36.	House Arrest	243
	Epilogue: The Final Farewell	249
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	253
	<i>Index</i>	255

Photosection appears between pages 134 and 135.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War—or *Nakba* (Catastrophe), as it is referred to in the Arab world—armed Zionist gangs like Irgun and Stern, who were supported by British, European, and American Jews, forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians out of Palestine and into adjacent countries, in defiance of the United Nation’s Partition Resolution 181. Passed in 1947, Resolution 181 called for the partition of Palestine into separate states, one for the Jews and one for the Palestinians. This war marked the beginning of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, with the exception of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



In June 1967, for the first time since 1948, and following the Six Days’ War that led to Israel’s defeat of the combined Arab forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, the Palestinians had the opportunity to take Palestinian decision making back into their own hands.

During meetings held by Palestinian organizations in Damascus that year, there was talk of establishing a united Palestinian front, aimed at launching an armed struggle against the Israeli occupation. During these meetings, members of Fateh (the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, an organization within the PLO founded by Yasser Arafat) disagreed over who should be their leader. Taking advantage of this situation, Yasser Arafat slipped into the Occupied Territories and spent a long period of time organizing and uniting Fateh associates. When he returned to the PLO’s Damascus headquarters, he was elected by his colleagues to be the undisputed leader of Fateh, thus making headlines in the Lebanese press: “Yasser Arafat is the only official Fateh

spokesperson.” A photograph of him wearing dark glasses was published; this is how observers would always remember Yasser Arafat.



Arafat's rise to power, however, had begun much earlier. He suspended his university studies at the University of King Fuad I (later renamed University of Cairo) to become a volunteer in the Egyptian army during the 1948 war against Israel. In 1956, he joined the Egyptian resistance forces during the Suez Canal War, when the trilateral forces of the British, French, and Israelis attacked the Gaza Strip, Sinai, and the Suez Canal in the hope of gaining control of the canal after it had been nationalized by newly elected Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Upon returning to university, Arafat established the Palestinian Student Union, an organization comprised of Palestinian students enrolled in Egyptian universities, and rented an office that became the working cell for the defense of Palestinian rights. The Union soon grew into a broader organization, the General Union for Palestinian Students, which included all Palestinian students in universities throughout the world.

After graduating from the University of Cairo with a degree in civil engineering in 1956, Arafat headed to Kuwait to work, as did many Palestinian graduates at the time. Because they were highly educated and skilled in such fields as medicine, education, engineering, and economics, to name only a few, these young Palestinians were welcomed into all of the Arab countries. They brought with them the expertise these developing nations needed to build their infrastructures and contributed greatly to the development of the Arab Gulf States.

In Kuwait, Arafat was actively constructing a Palestinian movement aimed at liberating Palestine through armed struggle. He continued working to set up this movement during his stay in Kuwait as well as during his travels to Arab countries to recruit Palestinians for Fateh.

In 1965, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement declared its agenda and initiated military operations against Israel. During that time, Yasser Arafat left Kuwait for Syria and Lebanon, where he and other Palestinian supporters of active resistance to Israel were persecuted and arrested. Because they bordered Israel, Syria and Lebanon were perfect places from which he and his fighters could stage raids against the country. The men kept getting arrested because Arab countries at the time were reluctant to support the Palestinian resistance for fear of Israeli retaliations against any Palestinians residing within their borders. It was

common practice for openly rebellious Palestinians like Arafat to be put in jail and/or regularly harassed.

But the Palestinian National Liberation Movement really took off following the Israeli Army's June 1967 defeat of the Arab nations in the Six Days' War. It was then that the security institutions of the neighboring Arab countries changed their tunes. Up to that point they had opposed Palestinian organizations that advocated armed struggle against Israel, but after Israel captured so much Palestinian land, they could no longer practically, morally, or politically justify their persecution of those resistance organizations. Their excuses for "not getting involved" in the Palestine question no longer held up, for Israel now occupied what little remained of Palestine, including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, and the Golan Heights. The resistance fighters, including Yasser Arafat, seized this opportunity to recruit more fighters and get support from various Arab countries.

Time was of the essence. A network of armed units had to be created within the Occupied Territories and a support base had to be established outside of Palestine.

Three years earlier, in 1964, the League of Arab States had established the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA), but these groups still remained under the control of neighboring Arab states (the Arab League) that were making all the decisions concerning the Arab-Israeli struggle. The PLO had obtained the recognition and support of the Arab states, but it still had no right to independent decision making.

The PLO had already established a framework and was recognized by the Palestinians as their legitimate representative, although it was still undecided at the time who would lead the armed struggle. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), founded and led by Dr. George Habash and Dr. Wadi' Haddad in 1968, established in Beirut an axis around which thousands gathered, including Egyptians and, at a later stage, Iraqis. Like Fateh, the PFLP existed under the greater umbrella of the PLO, but it was a more radical group. The PFLP refused to accept any political settlement with Israel whatsoever. Volunteers, many of whom had been smuggled in from the West Bank and Gaza, were taken to training camps in Syria.

Arafat knew that Palestinian control of the PLO would lead to a great push for Fateh and the revolution. The right moment to seize leadership of the PLO came in 1967, when the PFLP refused to take part in the establishment of a new Palestinian National Council, which had the purpose of electing a new Palestinian leader for the PLO. Since the PFLP had a larger membership than Fateh,

they could have overturned the elections if they had attended. But the PFLP's absence enabled Arafat to rally followers who supported his presidency, and he was thus elected as the PLO's leader.

Arafat held onto both positions as the political leader of the PLO and the head of the armed struggle on the ground, led by Fateh. This helped him to gain the greatest possible support and protection for the cause. When he was faced with opposition from the general Fateh leadership (the Fateh Central Committee), Arafat could use the Executive Committee of the PLO to exert pressure on them; and when faced with opposition within the Executive Committee, he could then use Fateh to back him up. I always thought this exhibited how clever he was—in order to get what he needed he would play one organization off the other, using his position in each organization to wield the necessary power to accomplish his goal.

Observers in the West never had an accurate impression of Yasser Arafat. They saw him as an unshaven ruffian who couldn't speak English well. He never studied in an Anglo-Saxon nation, so he had not had the opportunity to perfect the language as well as Binyamin Netanyahu, for example, who had grown up mostly in the United States. I noticed that people in the West tend to judge politicians by the way they look and speak, rather than by what they do. Their impressions are often based on physical appearance, which can lead to skewed perspectives. Because Arafat spoke in heavily accented English, people tended to listen not to what he was saying, but how he was saying it. In my opinion, people in the West saw Arafat through the negative propaganda that Israel had spread, which painted Arafat as a terrorist rather than as a freedom fighter. Arafat was easily recognizable by the black and white *hata* he would wear as well as his army fatigues. To Arafat, this meant he was in a constant state of struggle, but to the West, he was seen as scruffy. The West could not help but see him through prejudiced eyes. But those who met Arafat were always struck by his impeccable manners, generous nature, and brilliant mind. He never spoke very much, but when he did he spoke with eloquence and conviction. It was a shame more people couldn't understand his Arabic, because he spoke so fervently in his own language. His sentences were concise, acutely to the point, and factually accurate. He was extremely generous to everyone, helping the poor and sharing his food, even if he had little himself. He was an avid reader and had general knowledge about the world that few ever had the chance to hear. I was privileged to have been able to sit with him on long airplane flights, discussing history and political dialectics with him.