

Is Tripoli Arafat's Alamo?

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TRIPOLI, Lebanon — Yes, Yasser Arafat said, he had heard about the Alamo. And yes, he thought its heroic tradition of besieged Texas freedom-fighters extremely relevant to his current plight.

“That famous castle, yes, yes. It is similar,” the Palestine Liberation Organization chairman said of the Texans’ 1836 confrontation with Santa Ana’s Mexican army in San Antonio. “I am surrounded by those who are attacking me, from the seas the Israelis, and the Syrians ... from the land.”

Arafat was clearly warming to the stirring notion of himself battling overwhelming odds — until he was told that the entire Alamo garrison was killed during the siege.

“I know,” Arafat replied. He paused. “I, I am speaking about the circumstances around it,” by which he meant the more numerous enemy and not the outcome.

A comparison between Arafat and Davy Crockett may seem a bit unreal. But it fits into the surreal atmosphere surrounding the estimated 8,000 pro-Arafat PLO troops whose backs are to the sea in this ancient port city 50 miles north of Beirut.

What seems to be the last days of Arafat’s PLO in Lebanon are being spent in a fantasy of things that aren’t, weren’t—and maybe never will be. The mood is enhanced by a eerie 2-mile-high mushroom cloud, the product of fires started by fighting around an oil refinery on the north side of town.

After having been chased out of large portions of Lebanon, first by the Israeli army and now by Syrian-based Palestinian rebels, Arafat’s men talk about how well they fought. They speak about the love other Arab peoples have for their cause—while receiving pleas from Tripoli officials, all Arabs, to leave and while ignoring the fact their attackers are Arabs, too.

“This will spark the growth of national movements in other Arab countries,” said Mohammed Shakker, a stocky, 35-year-old PLO spokesman who studied economics at an American university. “The fight against the Syrians will provide the shock that will shake societies and help smaller movements to grow. We will return to Palestine in 25 years, by armed struggle and in the end with a political solution.”

Shakker—he said that is a nom de guerre, a code name to protect his family — fled his native West Bank, a part of Palestine, after Israel captured it in 1967. In 1971, as a member of the PLO, he escaped Jordan and the wrath of King Hussein’s Bedouin troops.

Last year, under the threat of Israeli annihilation he left Beirut on Arafat’s boat as part of a humiliating, U.S.-arranged evacuation.

Now he is in Tripoli, farther away from Palestine than Jordan, farther than Damascus, farther than Beirut, and perhaps about to go even farther away than ever since Israel’s creation in 1948 forced a Palestinian exodus.

Nevertheless, Shakker declared, “If I want to go to Palestine, I have to go in stages.”

Arafat, who has spent the majority of his 53 years fighting for a Palestinian state, also seemed oblivious of geographic considerations. He has long regarded himself as the head of a state that exists in fact, but lacks territory of its own. For a decade, until last year’s Israeli invasion, he had a de facto state-within-a-state in Lebanon.

The invasion resulted in much of his forces being scattered among a dozen Arab countries, which keep them tightly under wraps, often in remote areas. Some are closer to London than to Jerusalem.

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Yet, speaking to a few foreign journalists two days ago in a typical after-midnight interview, Arafat rattled off their current locations, as if they could be rushed back in a day.

He looked pale and tired while speaking, his green army cap not fully covering his thinning, graying hair. He repeatedly flashed his famous grin, but between questions he shut it off like a neon sign at closing time.

Arafat once ruled over a domain that included bustling West Beirut, a wide strip of southern Lebanon and most of the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon.

But now the man whose face graced the cover of Time magazine 15 years ago, who addressed the United Nations in 1974, who conferred with Arab heads of state, controls an area smaller than five square miles.

It consists of the shanty-town Badawi camp just to the east, a small T-shaped area adjoining Mount Turbol, a strip of connecting land along the Mediterranean coast and a sliver of land in Tripoli itself.

The Palestinian rebels, who are trying to stage a military coup against Arafat, last week captured the Nahr el Barad refugee camp, a few miles to the north. As the insurgents, who claim Arafat is too moderate, bore down on Badawi, Arafat and many of his fighters withdrew into Tripoli.

Few cities could be more appropriate for a last stand.

The 2,800-year history of Tripoli, always a commercial and agricultural center with strategic importance, is replete with sieges. In 635 A.D., a Syrian governor surrounded the city, but upon storming it discovered all the inhabitants had sneaked out by boat the night before. Five centuries later the European Crusaders captured the city, but only after a 10-year siege. An Egyptian sultan needed 140,000 men to end Christian rule 150 years later. The Palestinian rebels and their Syrian backers have a mere 20,000 or so.

The situation around Tripoli has not yet become a siege, but the prospect is on everyone's mind.

Arafat is sensitive about charges he is hiding behind the women and children of Tripoli, knowing the Syrians are unlikely to risk world opinion with an assault on the city.

"You are not authorized to ask me that question!" an angry Arafat shouted at one American journalist who asked why the PLO always puts its heavy guns, which invite attack, among civilians.

His official spokesman, Ahmed Abdul-Rahman, later said the placement of the guns was a matter of "geopolitics." Asked if they were being placed to save Arafat and his people, he replied with a grin, "Why not?"

Arafat now operates out of a dilapidated, three-story house surrounded by heaps of trash on an alley in the crowded Zariyeh section of this largely Moslem city.

PLO soldiers, some of them teenagers no older than 15, sport large rifles.

The fighters savor each acknowledgment that their leader is still important. They grin approvingly at the scores of foreign journalists who gather at an nearby intersection each day in hopes of an interview. On Friday, two khaki-clad men guarding Arafat's headquarters giggled with excitement at Arafat's picture on the cover of a Lebanese magazine.

A block away in the classroom of an elementary school that has become the PLO press headquarters, different slogans are scrawled each day on the blackboard. None is very original: "Yasser Arafat is the symbol of the revolution" was replaced by "the revolution are the people," which in turn became "we will fight until Palestine."

Meanwhile, in his public pronouncements, Arafat continues to use the same phrases, avoiding comments of substance, hoping, looking for an honorable way out.

"I am a freedom fighter," he said in a midnight interview. "We are a movement of the masses. When we started the revolution it was not a picnic, and it will not be a picnic. It is one of the longest marches in modern times, the longest till now."

Arafat was asked whether he was experiencing the worst crisis of his life. "It's a matter of how you are looking at it," he said. "It's a very hard struggle."

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Did that mean it was one of his worst days? "No," said Arafat, the enemy all around him, his military position impossible, his other forces, like those at the Alamo, too far away to help. "One of the difficult days, but not one of the worst."