

Hanan Ashrawi was pulled out of academe to be the mouthpiece for the Palestinian cause: Arafat's woman in Washington. Her mission? To make the world see the suffering beyond the stone-throwing. DAVID LESER looks at the woman, her political sisters and intrigues behind the peace talks

■ SHE IS AN ANOMALY AMONG HER people, the Palestinians. The revolutionary who never picked up a gun or a stone; the refugee who never lived in the squalid camps; the scholar who never had to toil in the olive groves or the Israeli-owned factories; the Christian-born secularist who never prayed to Allah.

golden-tongued doctor of literature, a person who could be the acceptable face of the Palestinians, a PLO sympathiser, but not a member of the organisation.

Ashrawi first came to prominence in 1988 after appearing in a televised debate between Palestinians and Israelis, broadcast live across the US. Not only was she the most impressive of the protagonists, she was also the one who best understood the poignant symbols of conflict. It was at her insistence, for example, that a fence was erected in the studio between the two sides to remind viewers that this was a debate not between equals but between occupier and occupied.

Dubbed "the diva of the West Bank" because of what's considered her tendency towards haughtiness, she is also generally regarded as the individual most responsible for kindling former US Secretary of State James Baker's sense of moral outrage over the treatment of Palestinians, and thus shifting US policy from its traditional pro-Israel approach to a more balanced view of the Arab/Israeli conflict. From Baker's change of heart flowed the momentum for the historic US-sponsored Middle East peace talks, first in Madrid, then in Washington, and, indirectly, Ashrawi's role as spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation.

"There is that famous occasion ▶

# the revolutionary with the golden tongue

And, of course, the woman of Arab politics, not the man.

Perhaps this is why Hanan Ashrawi, more than anyone, has been able to change the West's view of the Palestinians and their cause. For nearly three decades, they had been associated primarily with one man, Yasser Arafat, and the culture of terrorism, deadly intrigue and absolutism he personified.

Then Hanan Ashrawi emerged, a politically active academic who was able to articulate her people's plight in a way that it had never been articulated before. Gone, suddenly, from the public mind, was the keffiyeh, the three-day growth and the holster. In its place, the poised,

Photography **Daniel Leser**







when I really felt I had to tell him [Baker] what it meant to live under occupation," she says now from her home in Ramallah, 14 kilometres north of Jerusalem in the heart of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. "I really felt people were too detached. They were dealing with this as a political abstraction.

"And I said: 'To you this may be a political re-ordering and re-organisation of the region and it may be a feather in your political cap, but to us it is our lives.' I felt compelled to tell him what it means to be under occupation; what it means to be a mother raising kids under occupation; what it means not to take anything for granted; and what occupation does to human beings.

"And I said: 'This is the human dimension. It is not a political exercise for us.' I think I spoke for 15, 20 minutes in Jerusalem at the American Consulate, and when I stopped, I looked, and everyone was absolutely quiet. Some had tears in their eyes. He [Baker] looked very compassionate and I could see the sort of cold intellectual veneer was gone. He was more a human being dealing with human substance.

"That's why when in Madrid he talked about the human dimension, everybody said, 'That's Hanan's expression' — because I kept saying, 'You must never lose sight of the human dimension. That's the most important aspect of all.'"

And, yet, in the end, Hanan Ashrawi and the other members of the Palestinian delegation were sold down the river by Yasser Arafat. For most of 1993, they had been conducting negotiations with the Israelis, believing their position had the backing of their leader in Tunis.

They were wrong. As Ashrawi would discover later, Arafat had gone behind their backs to negotiate secretly with his most implacable foes.

**T**he Palestinians owe a lot to their women, not just Dr Hanan Ashrawi. There are women, for example, like Um Jihad, who is arguably more powerful behind the scenes — not to mention more respected within her patriarchal society — than Hanan Ashrawi will ever be. Um Jihad is the widow of Abu Jihad, formerly Yasser Arafat's right-hand man, who was killed in his sleep in Tunis in 1988 by an Is-

raeli hit-squad. Um Jihad was sleeping next to him when the assassins pumped 75 bullets into his body. Following his death, she became responsible for providing PLO welfare to all the families of those killed or jailed by the Israelis. Unlike Hanan Ashrawi, she is an elected member of Arafat's Fatah faction in the PLO, she doesn't speak in public and, like the great majority of Palestinians, she is Muslim.

And there are thousands of other women who will never bask in the media spotlight as Hanan Ashrawi has. They remain the unsung heroines of the *intifada*, or uprising, which began on December 9, 1987, in protest over conditions in the occupied territories and

ories which, although banned in 1988, continued to try to provide adult literacy classes, child-care facilities, home-economics training and political lectures on women's issues. They politicised themselves like no other women in the Arab world had ever done, with the possible exception of Algerians during their country's revolution.

"Every girl threw stones or flew a [banned Palestinian] flag," says Leah Tsemel, the radical left-wing Israeli lawyer who, for the past 21 years, has represented thousands of Palestinians in the Israeli military courts. She also happens to be Hanan Ashrawi's lawyer and close friend. "If you were to go to any village, every girl over 12 would tell



**That handshake, between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, marking the signing of the PLO-Israel Accord.**

the brutality of the occupation itself, with all the summary arrests, deportations, demolition of homes and curfews that have accompanied it.

With thousands of men being killed, jailed or deported, the level of participation by women in political activities tripled.

Ignoring, often, the wishes of their families to shun public activity, many took to the streets, staged sit-ins, organised demonstrations and carried stones in baskets above their heads for their children to throw at the Israelis. They clashed with soldiers or prison guards. They took on the burdens of raising and supporting their families alone. They organised popular committees throughout the occupied territ-

you what she did during the occupation. It was out of her father's control.

"There are many Palestinian women who, during the occupation, became free themselves. I think the whole of Palestinian society, particularly for women, went through an incredible change," she says.

"Women resisters fulfilled a very important and untraditional role and many of them will not return to a nice career in the family. No way."

For Hanan Ashrawi, there has always been an air of privilege surrounding her that set her apart, a sense that there were no barriers a sharp mind and a smooth way with words could not overcome. The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said once wrote that his people had always lacked a "witness", someone who could present the case of the Palestinians to the world. In many ways, Ashrawi became that witness.



"I felt for a long time," she says, "that we were barred from public discourse — that people generally found it easier to deal with the stereotypes: whether it was that we were non-existent or that we were terrorists."

"To really ... present ourselves and our humanity ... was something we could not do. And we felt, I felt, that it was time we challenged these stereotypes and perceptions."

"Jewish culture and Judaism and, therefore, the Israelis by extension, are familiar to the West. They are part of Western mentality and intellectual and cultural life. We are not. We are the outsiders."

Ashrawi agrees the Palestinians did themselves a huge disservice through their long-standing blanket rejection of a compromise and their charter calling for the destruction of the Jewish state.

"We were reacting to denial and the reactive stance is not always the positive stance," she says. "But I still maintain

Jordan), he found it difficult to believe. It's not that he was a bloodthirsty human being or wanted to destroy Israel, but he asked, 'Does this mean you are denying my birthright?' I said: 'No, it's because I want a future for my children. We have to deal with the realities. We have to deal with the future and not the past.'"

HANAN Ashrawi was born Hanan Mikhail on October 8, 1946, in Nablus, a town then occupied by British Mandate forces in Palestine. Less than two years later, the state of Israel would come into existence and her family would leave for Amman. Two years after that, the family would return again, this time to Ramallah, the largely Christian town on the West Bank of the Jordan River, known for an intellectual life second only to Jerusalem's.

Ashrawi remembers demonstrating as a child against Sir John Glubb, commander of Transjordan's Arab legion

Hanan's mother, Wadi'a, was from an old feudal family. She rebelled against its frozen value system by going to the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the 1930s to study surgical nursing.

They met in a hospital and married soon afterwards, despite the fact that he was four years younger than she — an unacceptable union in traditional Arab society. The fruits of this union were also to set tongues wagging, because in a world where sons were — and still are — prized, Daoud and Wadi'a Mikhail managed to produce five daughters.

"He [my father] always said, 'Just because you are a woman doesn't mean you are barred from doing the things that other people can do. Don't let anyone convince you that you are at a disadvantage because you are a woman,'" Ashrawi recalls.

"He defended our rights as daughters to do things that other daughters didn't do — like we used to go cycling; my sister used to go hunting with him. We had an unending credit with the bookshops. He said, 'You can do whatever you set your mind to.'"

"He was definitely way ahead of his time — and he fought for us, even when many parents of our friends used to come and tell him, 'They're a bad influence, you let them go out, you let them do things that other parents don't do.' And he said, 'I raise my daughters on trust.'"

His faith in them was rewarded handsomely. All five daughters have gone on to distinguish themselves in either the arts or economics.

After excelling at her Quaker-run school, it was inevitable that Ashrawi would go to university. At that time, in the 1960s, the bastion of liberal intellectualism in the Arab world was the American University of Beirut (AUB). This is where she eventually received her masters degree in renaissance English literature, and where she first became actively involved in politics.

In 1968, in the wake of the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, Ashrawi had joined the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), the successor body to the Palestinian Students' Association which Yasser Arafat had set up in Cairo in the 1950s. She was the only woman among 200 men and soon became the ►

## **"There wasn't a land without a people for a people without a land. We were there. Our land, our birthright, was given away and it is not an easy thing to accept"**

that the creation of the state of Israel was done at a great cost to the Palestinians. There wasn't a land without a people for a people without a land. We were there. Our land, our birthright, was given away and it is not an easy thing to accept."

For the only time during our 90-minute interview, Hanan Ashrawi cries. The tears are restrained, like she is, but they well at the corners of her eyes nevertheless, because this conversation reminds her of the argument she had with her father before he died.

"My father was one of the gentlest souls. He was a doctor who felt that one of life's callings was [to be humanitarian] ... He treated Jewish war prisoners, and, actually, after the 1967 [Arab-Israeli] war, many of them came to thank him for the way he treated them," Ashrawi says. "But when I accepted the two-state solution (a Jewish state and a Palestinian state co-existing between the Mediterranean and the

which, in 1950, had annexed the West Bank, land set aside under the 1947 United Nations partition plan for the Palestinians. (The Arabs' outrage over and rejection of this plan and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that followed effectively rendered the plan null and void.)

"I didn't know what it was all about," Ashrawi says. "All I knew was that my father said we are all going out to demonstrate, so my mother had combed our hair and put ribbons in our hair and we all went to demonstrate wearing ribbons."

Ashrawi's father, Daoud Mikhail, was the son of Greek Orthodox parents and a prominent doctor, socialist and founding member of the PLO. He was jailed by Jordan's King Hussein for his role in the Palestinian nationalist organisation, the National Socialist Party, which the Hashemite kingdom had come to regard as a threat. The jail was directly opposite the family home so little Hanan was able to visit him regularly.



spokesperson for the organisation's Lebanese branch. It was in her capacity as a radical student leader that, the following year in Amman, she first met the rising star of the Palestinian resistance himself, Yasser Arafat.

The Six Day War in June 1967 was a disastrous loss for the Arab world and a pivotal moment in Palestinian history, not least because it made the Palestinians realise they could no longer rely on their Arab brothers for help in retrieving their homeland.

Within a week, Israel had captured the Golan Heights from Syria, the Gaza Strip and Sinai desert from Egypt, and East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan (formerly Transjordan).

Hundreds of thousands of new refugees swelled the ranks of the estimated 700,000 Palestinians who had fled their homes following the 1948 war. The Palestinians now found themselves scattered throughout the Middle East, although many later went to Europe,

States for further study, and by the end of 1973, had gained her doctorate in English medieval literature. She returned to the Israeli-occupied West Bank on a re-unification permit which her father had spent nearly seven years trying to obtain. She was arrested soon after, charged with incitement, breaking the terms of her family reunion, disturbing the public order and being a threat to the security of the state of Israel. She was released on bail the same day.

"I was fond of demonstrations," she says. "When they asked me if I actually participated in demonstrations, I said, 'Yes.' I said, 'We have the right to. We are protesting the occupation and we have the right to protest and defend ourselves.' So, of course, that made me guilty."

The jail across the road from her family home is a place that Ashrawi has become increasingly familiar with over the years. Apart from still living in the same house and having a view of the

tocracy comes in ... I think she is the aristocrat of the Palestinian people."

In 1975, Hanan Mikhail married Emile Ashrawi in Jerusalem. They now have two daughters, Amal, 15, and Zeina, 12. Her husband, who is four years younger than Ashrawi, is a musician. With one of her sisters, he founded the Palestinian theatre movement, the first contemporary theatre in the occupied territories. He is now a full-time househusband.

"When I came back from the United States, I had no intention of getting married, because I didn't like the institution as a sense of possession and ownership and dictates," says Ashrawi. "And I didn't think that I would meet a man who was confident enough and liberated enough to deal with a woman on an equal basis and who would look at marriage as a complementary relationship of partnership rather than competition."

"[Emile] does have his career and he does have his interests. At the same time, when the time came for me to choose to press ahead with my work ... he knew that being spokesperson [for the Palestinian delegation] ... is very taxing and demands a lot of time and energy. We talked about it. We take decisions collectively, democratically. And [the family] decided they would, as my daughter Zeina said, 'lend me to the peace process'."

## **She has the steeliness of someone who's been under interrogation so often she knows when to remain cool (often when her interrogators are becoming apoplectic with rage)**

the United States and South America.

An estimated 1.6 million lived under Israeli control in the West Bank, mostly as Jordanian citizens, and in the Gaza Strip, as stateless people; about 710,000 chose to remain inside Israel and become Israeli citizens; another 1.3 million lived in Jordan with Jordanian passports; 700,000 had gone to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states while approximately 750,000 lived as refugees in Syria and Lebanon. And it was in the refugee camps in Lebanon that Ashrawi first came face to face with the horror that had befallen her people.

"I couldn't believe the misery, that such misery could be allowed," she says. "And I couldn't believe the commitment and sense of hope that people had. In 1967 there was a sense of despair and defeat, but at the same time, there was a sense of commitment to a Palestinian question as a whole — a sense that we could make a difference."

In 1971, Ashrawi left for the United

compound from several rooms, it is where Ashrawi has found herself on a number of occasions under what the Israelis call "pre-emptive detention".

"They detain you for a day on [say] a national occasion, to prevent any kind of disruption. So I was one of those who was generally detained. I used to take with me all the time a book, cigarettes and chocolate. In my handbag, I always used to have things like that." Ashrawi laughs a characteristically deep and mellifluous laugh while another plume of smoke coils slowly from her nose and mouth. She is proud of her record.

"You usually feel the power game between the occupier and the person under occupation," her friend Leah Tsemel explains. "But I don't think Hanan ever bent. She didn't have an inferiority complex at all. In fact, it was always the other way around. She always gave the Israelis a feeling of superiority and this is where her aris-

**T**he tragic encounter between Arabs and Jews, and more particularly between Palestinians and Israelis, over the past 100 years, has been one of the most complex, passionately fought out, and heartbreaking conflicts in the world. It was a conflict that bred desperate positions, like that of an Israeli taxi driver who said: "We should just beat them and beat them and beat them until they stop hating us." It was a conflict that, once you had come to understand and empathise with it, never left you alone.

Perhaps this was because it was a blood feud of truly Biblical proportions, one between cousins, between the descendants of Abraham, and it was being waged in a place that had been the rock and ruin of so many civilisations. In the foreground were two peoples with so much in common, but with competing claims of almost mystical attachment to



the same land, and in the background, the threat of nuclear catastrophe.

Both sides have always seen themselves as victims, which they were, and are. They have both been prey to the outside world, and each other. The Israelis are the heirs of historical anti-semitism and genocide, and the survivors of six wars in 45 years with hostile Arab neighbours who, with the exception of Egypt in 1977, refused to accept their existence. The Palestinians are the victims of colonial duplicity, Arab treachery, Jewish nationalism (Zionism), and, for the past 26 years, Israeli occupation, with all of the gross violation of human rights that has entailed. Two victims colliding on the fault-line.

Through their own filtered versions of history, and after nearly a century of demonising each other, neither side had

ing of bells and the haunting call to prayer from the muezzin.

This ancient, mournful city which has been fought over for thousands of years, and been revered by three great religions, is now, astonishingly, in the throes of becoming possibly the capital of two states, Israel and Palestine. The Israeli public hasn't digested this yet, but it seems almost impossible that old warriors like Arafat and Rabin would ever have clasped hands on the south lawn of the White House unless the most vexed issue of all, the status of Jerusalem, had been worked out in advance, privately.

For the past six years, during the *intifada*, the streets of Jerusalem's Arab quarter had been unnaturally quiet, the people smouldering in their resentment, their main weapon of protest a commercial strike or the more ingenious one of hanging washing from clothes-

home, given her constant shuttling between Jerusalem, Tunis, Washington and London. "I might be home," she said when I was still in Sydney. "But you can never be sure."

She *was* there, but only just. Two hours after our interview, Arafat summoned her to PLO headquarters in Tunis. All further appointments that week and the next were cancelled.

The woman I found was a woman under siege. Her house is guarded by Palestinians and under surveillance by Israelis. Day and night, journalists from around the world pour through the living room. The phone rings non-stop and there are reams of faxes and messages.

Then there are the death threats. Over the years, she has had a number of them from Israeli extremists, and on more than one occasion, actual attempts on her life, the most chilling being a



**Above left, Jews and Israeli soldiers in the embattled old city of Jerusalem.**

**Above right, a market in its Arab quarter.**

been able to see that they were all, Israelis and Palestinians, wounded spirits in the Promised Land. Until now. Perhaps.

The signing of the PLO-Israel Accord on September 13, symbolised by *that* handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, marked the opening of what promises to be one of the most extraordinary chapters in Middle East history.

In the old city of Jerusalem, you can see the shift already. Here, beyond the Damascus Gate, in the eerie half-light of the Arab souk, with its creamy, crumbling dolomite houses, gawdy souvenir shops, fruit stalls and felafler stands; its hawkers and hustlers and holy men; the ever-present smell of black coffee and baklava hanging in the breeze; the clang-



lines in accordance with the colours of the outlawed national flag.

Today, Palestinian flags fly everywhere from the rooftops; PLO signs are daubed over the walls of the city and T-shirts emblazoned with Yasser Arafat's grinning face are on sale. Less than six months ago, engaging in any of these activities could have resulted in a prison sentence.

And not far from this international flashpoint, in the West Bank town of Ramallah, was Ashrawi, the woman who had helped give her people the sort of victory that had always eluded them on the battlefield; the woman who, to use former Middle East correspondent Thomas Friedman's phrase, had taken her people "from the desert of obscurity to the land of prime time".

Our interview had been arranged at short notice. Even en route to Tel Aviv, I was uncertain if she would still be at

few years ago when a man walked into a maximum security centre where she and other Palestinians were being questioned and fired his machine gun at her. The machine gun jammed, otherwise she and possibly as many as 20 others would have been killed.

More recently, she has been informed by her security guards that an assassination team has been sent from another country (she won't say which, although it is likely to be Iran) to eliminate her and two others. She says she is not afraid — at least "not in the paralytic sense".

The only sign that she is feeling the pressure is that she is never without a cigarette. Otherwise, her equanimity is remarkable. She has the temperance of a teacher, but also the steeliness of someone who has been under interrogation so many times she knows just when and how to remain cool (often ▶



when her interrogators are becoming apoplectic with rage).

Her austere demeanour alarms many Israelis, because they feel it reflects a lack of humanity. Her reluctance to specifically condemn violence against Jews is further evidence, they argue, of a hardness of heart.

I ask her about this and her reply is as polished — and convincing — as the diamonds that encircle her pearl earrings. “The Palestinians are always being tested to prove their humanity. I don’t see people calling the Israeli Government every day and asking them to condemn the killings of Palestinians.

“But let me tell you something. I have always maintained, and I continue to maintain, that the responsibility of any genuine leadership is to save lives, not to waste lives and destroy lives. And that every life lost is one life that should not have been.

“Nobody takes the place of anybody else ... and I don’t distinguish between the lives of people on the basis of religion or national origin or whatever. That’s why I say I condemn all loss of life; all acts of violence that seek to destroy innocent lives. But I will not be dragged into allocating to Israeli lives more value than to Palestinian lives. Or vice versa. I just want to deal with the causes that make people kill each other,” she says.

And what about the psychology of fear that has dominated so much of Israeli life. Does she understand that?

“I do. I can’t personalise it, but I understand it. I understand many of their motivations. I don’t generalise, but I do understand that there is a collective Jewish trauma. And there is a collective Palestinian trauma. Theirs, in a sense, came to us from the West, but it is very real to them and it influences what they do. And it is used to justify many things.

“Ours came as a result of their trauma and it is twofold — either exile or occupation. And both states of being are abnormal and painful and undesirable ... So, in a sense, we were locked in this embrace of historical delegitimisation. Each one wanted to delegitimise the other. The clash, not just of cultures and histories and political realities, but a concept of legitimacy.

“And it was only recently that we realised that each side’s legitimacy depended on the other. As long as the

Israelis were de-legitimising the Palestinians, they couldn’t have any legitimacy. And we understood that the world would not legitimise the Palestinians unless we legitimised the Israelis.”

**L**ike war, peace packs its own punch, and in October 1991, James Baker pulled off what was then seen as a miraculous achievement — getting all the parties involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict to attend the Madrid peace conference.

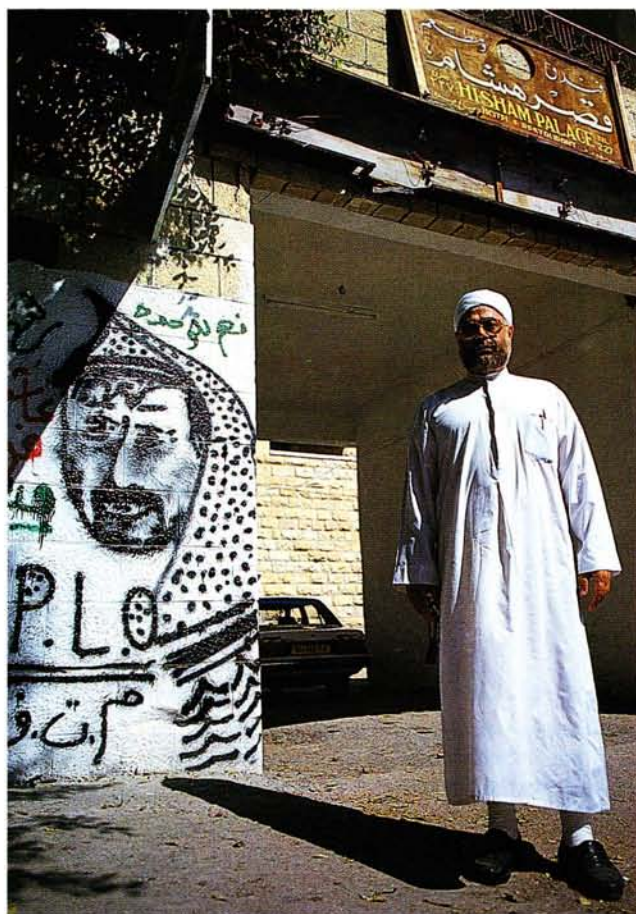
Except, of course, the PLO. At Israeli insistence, the Palestinian delegates to the conference were prohibited from membership in an organisation which Israel still refused to recognise. Instead, they allowed leading non-PLO figures from the occupied territories, many of them, like Ashrawi, prominent academics from Bir Zeit university, to represent Palestinian interests, although as everyone knew, these people could never have acted without the blessing of Yasser Arafat.

The Madrid conference turned out to be one of Hanan Ashrawi’s finest hours. The keynote Palestinian speech, while delivered by chief Palestinian negotiator Haidar Abdul Shafi was written by Ashrawi: “We have seen you,” Shafi said, speaking directly to the Israelis, “look back in deepest sorrow at the tragedy of your past and look on in horror at the disfigurement of the victim turned oppressor. Not for this have you nurtured your hopes, dreams and offspring.”

Such an impression did Ashrawi make at the conference, not only on members of the international media, but also on members of the US Administration, that when it seemed as if Israeli police were going to arrest her on her return home, President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker in-

tervened. Baker praised her and Faisal Husseini, the head of the Palestinian delegation, for their personal courage which, he said, had “created the possibility of a better life for Palestinians”.

At this time, Yasser Arafat and the rest of the PLO leadership based in Tunis — the “outsiders” as they were known in political circles — were still suffering the ignominy of having supported Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Negotiations with the Israelis were in the hands of the “insiders”, the Pales-



**Jericho's would-be mayor and general manager of the Hirsham Palace Hotel, Rajai Abdo. The hotel is to be home to the interim Palestinian Government.**

tinians from the occupied territories.

For months, the talks had dragged on in Washington without any sign of progress. Deep-seated mistrust and intransigence had attended every stage. The Palestinians wanted Israel to return the more than 400 people they had deported to Lebanon. The Israelis wanted the *intifada* called off. The Palestinians wanted an agreement which didn't fragment Palestinian authority on the West Bank, didn't avoid the issue of



Jewish settlements and didn't side-step the explosive question of Jerusalem. The Israelis wanted these issues delayed.

For these reasons and others, Israeli Prime Minister Rabin decided at last to sup with the devil himself, Yasser Arafat, a man whom Israel's feared security service, Mossad, had sought to assassinate on numerous occasions, most creatively in the early 1970s when an Israeli "contact" inside the PLO had tried to slip poison into his rice.

The push for peace largely came about for reasons of realpolitik. From Israel's perspective, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the Jewish state was no longer the strategic Western ally in the Middle East that it had been during the Cold War. The country's ageing leadership was also becoming more afraid of Islamic fundamentalism than Palestinian nationalism. And Rabin knew Arafat was prepared to settle for far less than his negotiating team in Washington was demanding.

## **Ashrawi's version of the conversation is that she said to Arafat: "You look like you have something up your sleeve; you're hiding something" and he said: "Yes, I am"**

After nearly a lifetime of dedicating himself to the armed struggle, Arafat was ready to cut the deal he'd been hinting at since 1988 when he first publicly acknowledged Israel's right to exist. The Gulf War had left him out of favour with many Arab leaders, and his organisation, cut off from funds by Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States, was almost bankrupt. He'd also been marginalised by the Palestinian delegation and was eager to regain a toehold in the occupied territories. He decided, therefore, to do what he had denounced Egypt's Anwar Sadat for doing 16 years earlier — negotiate directly.

So alarmed were Hanan Ashrawi and other members of the delegation that Arafat was preparing to accept a deal favouring the Israelis, that, in August, she and two others actually flew to Tunis to resign. It is rumoured that Arafat said to Ashrawi: "You must do whatever you think is right", before turning to the men and saying: "This is

not the time to resign." Ashrawi's version of the conversation is that she said to Arafat: "You look like you have something up your sleeve; you're hiding something." And he said: "Yes, I am."

What Arafat was concealing were the details of 14 secret meetings held this year in Norway. The meetings, arranged by Norwegian facilitators, were between representatives of the PLO and the Israeli Government, the first time these two sworn enemies had ever officially sat down face-to-face.

Hanan Ashrawi had actually helped set up the initial breakfast meeting in London in December 1992, but what she — and practically everybody else, including the American administration — was unaware of was how far the talks had progressed and how close the two sides were to signing an accord.

She and the other members of the delegation were furious. Their negotiating position had been undermined and they were now in the position of being

forced to defend something that at first glance looked like a selling out of the Palestinian cause. Ashrawi lost no time in making it known to Arafat what she thought. But just as quickly she was pulled back into line.

Ashrawi still maintains that she would have been more hardline than Arafat in extracting concessions from the Israelis. It was fine for the Israelis to withdraw from Gaza and Jericho first, as they had pledged, but she wanted a firm commitment from them on the much more fraught issues of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, security arrangements, the return of refugees, and borders.

Ashrawi insists, however, that her fears have been eased by the comprehensive nature of the Israel-PLO Accord and the fact that, among other things, there is a timetable for Israeli withdrawal and future negotiations on the permanent status of the land. She rejects, therefore, any claim that she was

duped by Arafat. "No, I have always said that the only way to achieve results is to negotiate discreetly, away from the public eye. Otherwise you would have a public debate."

The secret Norway channel proved what many involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have long known — that if individuals can come to know, trust and like each other, as the PLO's chief negotiator Abu Ala and his counterpart from Israel Uriel Savir did during nine months of intimate talks, the earth can move.

This is what had been happening over the past five or six years, for example, behind the massive facade of the Vatican's Notre Dame cathedral in east Jerusalem. Coming together in secret, and in the knowledge that as one of the only neutral places in the city, it was safe from Israeli military police raids, leaders of the Palestinian uprising and prominent Israelis from the foreign ministry and the military and intelligence establishments had met to discuss everything from water, education, and security issues to disengagement from the occupied territories and the future of Jerusalem. Hanan Ashrawi was privy to these talks, and more.

"I was among the first to start the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue here," she says. She pauses for a long time, before making a most remarkable confession: "Now I can say it, but it was illegal for many years ... We formed the first Palestinian-Israeli party. I joined it in '74. It was illegal. Nobody knows about it. [At least] very few people. It is for the history books. It had different cells. It was called the League of Communist Workers. We were neither a league or communists or workers."

At the same time, Ashrawi was also developing a dialogue with leading left-wing Israeli academics who had formed the Solidarity Committee at Bir Zeit university, the most nationalistic Palestinian campus on the West Bank and one which was to be closed 14 times during the *intifada*. This is where Ashrawi, apart from teaching English, was also in charge of the human rights committee. It is also how she came to meet the Israeli lawyer, Leah Tsemel.

"She was one of the lawyers we used in defence of our students," says Ashrawi ... "and I used to call her up at all times of day and night. She is a marvel- ▶



lous woman... I used to call her for all sorts of emergencies when the army would raid the campus; when students were beaten and people were arrested. One night they had arrested 35 of our students and I called her and said, 'You have to come immediately.'" Tsemel replied that she would gladly come, except that her baby, Talila, was only a few months old and still being breastfed. Ashrawi told her it didn't matter. She was feeding her own daughter, Zeina, and she would feed Talila as well.

The Israeli lawyer was to spend all day in an Israeli military court defending the Palestinian lecturer's students while the Palestinian lecturer breastfed their daughters.

**I**n the hot, sleepy town of Jericho on the West Bank, preparations are underway for what only a few months ago would have been unthinkable — the arrival of the great Houdini of Middle East politics, Yasser Arafat. If all goes well — a big *if* in the Middle East — Arafat will be flown into Jericho in January to take up his position as head of the first Palestinian Government (known as the Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority). This governing council is due to be elected no later than July, for a transitional period of no more than five years, at which time a permanent settlement based on UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 will be implemented. (To the Palestinians, this, of course, means a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with Jericho serving as the capital until they are able to secure east Jerusalem.)

The new headquarters for the interim Palestinian Government has already been leased for around \$3 million. It will be the Hirsham Palace Hotel, the delightfully dilapidated former summer residence of King Hussein.

Summoned from prayer at the mosque because of the presence of journalists at his hotel, the general manager, Rajai Abdo, told *HQ* that he hoped Arafat would live on his premises for the first year — until he had found himself a suitable home. A man with a political science degree from America and no shortage of ambition — he wants to be the first democratically elected mayor of Jericho and he wants Jericho to be "the next Mecca" of the

world — Abdo says he is delighted by the peace accord. On the other hand, his views on the role Ashrawi played during the negotiations reflect the still widespread traditional view of women in Arab politics. "I have to say the truth. The majority of Palestinians are Muslim and whether [the religion] is Islam, Judaism or Christianity, it does not approve of a woman conducting its affairs.

"We are a conservative society. We look to women as figures of pampering. We like to spoil our women, comfort them. That is the tradition of Islamic society, and to see women taking hard positions and having haircuts like a man, that is not taken kindly.

"But the people right now are so excited, so tickled with the peace that her position does not threaten them. There is a place for every individual in an elected government, and if she was elected, who I am to stand against her?"

But whether or not Ashrawi has a constituency remains to be seen. There are many who believe that the only power base she has ever had is the one she has forged so consummately with the Western media. They believe that if she were to ever go out on the hustings, she would discover how embarrassingly small her support really was.

Even within the Palestinian delegation itself, Hanan Ashrawi was never the most popular figure. Apart from the unease prompted by her being a woman and a Christian, there has long been the feeling that she is too eager to hold court with the media and far too arrogant about her command of English, considerable though that is. According to one insider, she would insist that she be closely consulted at every stage of the negotiations in Washington, even though she was the delegation's spokesperson and not a member of the negotiating team. She believed Faisal Husseini, the leader of the delegation and a man very close to Arafat, didn't speak English well enough. (He'd picked him up in an Israeli prison, mainly by reading *War and Peace*.)

Husseini was not impressed with what he saw as Ashrawi's arrogance. On a more trivial note, he didn't think much of her constant smoking either, given the fact that he is asthmatic. All this is said to have caused a lot of backbiting inside the delegation.

Now that Arafat and the "outsiders"

are back in charge, her star has been eclipsed, and the best example of this is Arafat's refusal to read the lyrical speech she wrote for him at the historic signing ceremony in Washington. Instead, he chose a rather prosaic one drafted by a close aide. The reason for this snub to Ashrawi is simple. She has fulfilled her communications role and, for the moment anyway, her views are of little interest to the PLO chairman. Her job now is to be the good foot soldier.

But what does Ashrawi want for herself? "You have caught me in the middle of my trying to decide what I want to do," she replies. "I think my daughters' lending me to the peace process has run its course. We have brought them to mutual recognition and talking to each other. We have established a certain discourse and approach. I would like to see myself go back to something academic.

"This is the end of a phase and the beginning of another. I am willing to help set up the new phase — if there is a new phase. If not, I really would like to be able to be myself, rather than have things imposed on me by necessity.

"In terms of constituency or not, I think that can be tested. I think if I wanted to run [for election], I wouldn't be intimidated by those who say I don't have it — because I talk to people a lot and I know what people think. And there is a certain amount of respect to not being bought or sold; to not having sold one's voice or conscience."

Anything can happen, of course. Ashrawi could again find herself in Arafat's favour, perhaps the minister for Culture, Education or the Media in a new Palestinian government. Perhaps in Washington as the PLO's representative, a position she denied to *HQ* she wanted, but one others believe she has coveted for a long time. Or the peace could be wrecked, Arafat assassinated, and the region plunged once more into chaos. There are extremists on both sides who would like nothing better.

That's why this is not a euphoric moment for Hanan Ashrawi. "It is a mixture of joy and apprehension," she says. "Now we are starting a very difficult phase. Now is the acid test. It's make or break."

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