MERIA

# AMMAN 1970, A MEMOIR

By Norvell De Atkine*

*This is the first in a series of memoirs on the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s. Norvell de Atkine was one of the first Middle East experts trained by the U.S. military. He attended the American University in Beirut, became a U.S. military attaché in Jordan, and spent many years working in the Arab world.*

I had just completed my studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1970, as part of the US Army Foreign Area Specialist program, when Major Bob Perry, assistant U.S. army attaché in Jordan, was murdered by Palestinian gunmen—probably from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) at his home in front of his wife and children.(1) I was assigned to replace him.

I had already been prepared for the revolutionary situation I would encounter in Jordan by my three years as a student at AUB, at the time nicknamed "Guerrilla U". There were remarkably contradictory aspects to the experience. On the surface, the Middle Eastern students were united around the need for revolutionary change and support for the Palestinian cause. Underneath that surface, however, conversations demonstrated a student body divided along ethnic lines, with many of the groups despising (or at least distrusting) each other. Ironically, the Western students were often more pro-Palestinian than the non-Palestinian Arab students.

The non-Palestinian Arabs, especially the Lebanese Sunni seemed to resent the Palestinians for seizing the limelight. The Maronite Christians and Greek Catholics seethed with resentment. The Greek Orthodox students appeared obsessed with proving themselves Arabs, too, by their militant rhetoric. The Armenians tried to stay out of the fray, the Druze kept their own counsel, and the Shia Muslims kept themselves as invisible as possible. In a preliminary taste of events to follow there was also bitter antagonism between Palestinian and East Bank Jordanian students

An attentive student could receive a terrific education at AUB from such professors as Hannah Battatu, Zeine N. Zeine and my mentor Dr. Joseph Malone. Battatu, a meticulous researcher and lecturer, was a Palestinian Marxist who, despite my disagreement with his ideology, was a superb and objective lecturer. Although it did not sit well with the mostly Arab students, who looked for affirmation of their wish for a united Arab world, he never hesitated to point out that almost every secular ideological movement in the Arab world was in some way an attempt by non-Sunni or non-Arab minorities to attain a measure of equality with the Sunni Arab majority. Why, he asked, were Communists in the Arab world almost exclusively Christians, Kurds, Jews, Armenians and Shia Muslims?

Zeine showed how the forgotten details of Middle Eastern history were often the key to understanding the big picture. He also enraged some Arab students with his view that the Arab world had been more peaceful and enjoyed better living standards under the Ottoman Empire than during independence.

Nevertheless, Beirut was a capital city for the world's then highly fashionable radical movements. New Left gurus from everywhere came to observe and praise the Palestinian movement. There were huge photos on the school's walls of Israeli soldiers killed at the 1968 Karama battle in Jordan. Pictures of the latest Palestinian martyrs were on posters everywhere on the walls of Beirut buildings, replaced by their successors every few days. The most common slogan was the ubiquitous "this generation shall see the sea," referring to the presumably inevitable elimination of Israel and a Palestinian march to the Mediterranean coast there.

Among the fascinating characters shuttling in and around Beirut in those days was the carefully coiffured Leila Khaled, the world's only two-time aircraft hijacker, a PFLP activist wearing the latest London fashions, speaking in English to an admiring throng of students. Another visitor was Tom Hayden, the high priest of the American radical "New Left" making the obligatory pilgrimage to a Beirut refugee camp. My favorite character, however, was the son of the Egyptian ambassador to Lebanon. His father was known by everyone as the "high commissioner" of Lebanon, because, as Gamal Abdel Nasser's representative, he manipulated the country at will (or was perceived to do so). Nevertheless his son, who spoke in American slang and associated almost exclusively with American students, spoke of the Arabs as if they were an alien race. Among others representing the bewildering and byzantine nuances of Arab society and politics was our Christian Palestinian family doctor who came early one morning in December, 1968, to visit my wife suffering from hepatitis, and in a state of elation related the details of an Israeli commando attack on Beirut Airport conducted the night before, convinced that it would pull the country into a full-scale war with Israel. Another very different perception a short time later was that of the Lebanese Maronite villagers of Mount Lebanon, who, during a visit by myself with a British officer from the Trucial Oman Scouts of the Gulf Emirates, expressed admiration at the Israeli success in destroying 13 Lebanese airliners. Their opinions prompted my incredulous British guest to plaintively ask, "Are these people Arabs?"

Ultimately, the stage was actually being set for a Lebanese civil war in which the PLO was a major participant. In brief, but bloody, battles in the south, the Lebanese forces actually won militarily but Nasser's pressure led to Beirut's surrender in the 1968 Cairo agreement. The Lebanese government agreed to let the PLO operate against Israel under certain conditions, including a Palestinian agreement that their soldiers would not carry weapons in Lebanese cities. Within a few months, however, all the conditions were forgotten and *fedayeen* could be seen strolling along Beirut's main streets carrying AK-47s.

In December 1967, while on a visit from Lebanon to the Ghor Valley, I witnessed first-hand the tinderbox environment existing between Jordan and Israel. Retaliating for a cross- river *fedayeen* raid, the Israelis strafed a column of Jordanian troops killing several and knocking out an M-88 tank retriever in the middle of the road. Soldiers and civilians pointed toward the sky and talked about "American" airplanes, though I tried to explain they were French-made *Mysteres.* Since no one seemed ready to pick up the bodies left in the road, myself and a fellow American officer loaded a couple of them into our small compact car and took them to a nearby police station.

All of this prepared me for my arrival in Amman in late June 1970. The first thing I saw when the plane landed reflected the current situation in that city. There were

two visa control and customs checks: one by Jordanian officials and another by PLO representatives. There were indeed two governmental authorities coexisting in an uneasy, confrontational relationship. Most of Amman and a large slice of northern Jordan were controlled by various Palestinian *fedayeen* factions. Their Toyota trucks with machine guns mounted in the back constantly patrolled the streets of the capital.

While my Jordanian army colleagues repeatedly told me in the following weeks that there was Palestinian-Jordanian antagonism, the officer who was my counterpart explained he had to change into civilian clothes to go to his home in the Ashrafiyah district of Amman to avoid being harassed, or worse, by youths in his mostly Palestinian neighborhood.

Aside from the tumultuous political situation, the U.S. embassy was also in chaos. The previous U.S. ambassador, Harrison Symmes had been declared *persona non grata* by King Hussein in May 1970 and the embassy itself was leaderless. This action by the King was taken in vain attempt to placate the increasingly strident demands of the Palestinian militants, much in the same manner as the dismissal of Glubb Pasha to placate Arab nationalists in 1956. Dependents had already been evacuated. With little or no guidance coming from the embassy's senior staff, a few of us devised our own escape and evasion plan should we be overrun.

Every day there were rumors of the regime's impending collapse and incessant threats against Americans in the Arab news media. There were months of intermittent warfare between the army and PLO forces. Ceasefires were repeatedly made and quickly broken. Aside from the murder of Major Perry, two American women were raped, an embassy official was abducted and beaten, and a sergeant from the attaché office was taken from his car at a PFLP roadblock and held in a cage for several days.

Numerous American-owned automobiles had been stolen by the gangs often linked to Palestinian political groups that did as they pleased in Amman. The usual technique was to come to the door and demand the keys to the car. Every trip to and from the embassy was an anxious journey. We were constantly stopped at *fedayeen* checkpoints. Young 14 and 15 year-old members of the *Ashbal* youth group manned roadblocks and scrutinized our identity cards in a leisurely and insolent manner before waving us on. Though their weapons were loaded, they obviously did not know much about how to handle them.

The behavior of the armed *fedayeen* angered the rank and file of the Jordanian army and antagonized much of the civilian population, including a segment of the Palestinian residents. The disdain was mutual. Palestinian West Bankers referred to Jordanian East Bankers as "*al-hufa*" (the barefoot ones), to imply they were backward and illiterate. For their part, Jordanian officers blamed Palestinian forces for the 1967 defeat and resented the PLO's claiming the 1968 battle of *Karama* as a victory when most of the fighting had been done by the regular army. Referring to 1967, the director of Jordanian army operations claimed, "The Palestinians ran like rabbits."

The Palestinian relationship was particularly bad with a small but vital part of the Jordanian military structure, the Circassians and Chechens. These peoples of the Caucasus, though a miniscule percentage of the population, constituted an inordinate percentage of the fighter pilots, Special Forces, and palace guard. They were fanatically loyal to the Hashemites. They and their families were also frequent targets of Palestinian harassment or physical attacks.

Thus, Jordanian society was highly polarized and this situation intensified in the spring and summer of 1970, with frequent shootouts between Jordanian troops and various *fedayeen* factions. Inevitably, negotiations would follow and a truce or agreement would be announced on Radio Amman in the morning with the government newspapers urging people to get back to work. By late afternoon, firing would break out again, panicking parents to rush to school to pick up their children.

Both sides suffered from serious flaws in their leadership. Arafat did little or nothing to control the various PLO factions or to discipline his own men. He would claim control of the Palestinian movement when beneficial to do so and point to "renegade" organizations over which he claimed he had no control when it suited him. The radical Palestinian leaders, like Nayif Hawatmah and George Habash, openly called for the king's overthrow.

Yet King Hussein was also not always the resolute and determined leader often described by later accounts. Far from looking for an excuse to defeat the Palestinians, he desperately sought an alternative to a showdown with the PLO. In the end, his counterparts' behavior forced him to act decisively.

The final turning point was the seizure of three Western airliners by PFLP terrorists on September 6 and 9, 1970. The hijackers forced them to land at Dawson's landing, a saltflat field that had been used by the British air force during World War Two. The PLO hijackers renamed it "Thawra" (revolutionary) field. (After the civil war ended, the U.S. Air Force used it to land supplies and ammunition for the Jordanian military. It was jokingly nicknamed "reja'iya" (reactionary) field, after the radicals' insulting name for their moderate rivals.)

After fruitless negotiations, the three airliners were blown up and most of the passengers were released. However about 50, mostly Israelis, were kept by the PFLP and scattered around Amman for another two weeks. Shortly thereafter Palestinian elements declared the area around Irbid in northern Jordan as "Free Jordan." It was obvious that The Hashemite regime was losing control.

In the U.S. Embassy, the situation took a decided turn for the better when Ambassador L. Dean Brown arrived and took charge. A group of first-rate Foreign Service personnel--including Hume Horan, Pat Theros, and Bob Pelletreau—became the embassy's core group. They were keen observers who empathized with the Arabs without the gushy myopic idealization so often found among American academics and some Foreign Service officers.

At the same time, as Royal Guard officers later told me, the army told the king that he must act or the armed forces would move on their own to change the situation. Finally, on September 17, the cautious and reluctant king acted, ordering a massive military operation to clear Amman of the Palestinian organizations. That morning, the Jordanian Army moved into Amman in a sweep they confidently expected would last at most a few days. Their over-confidence was more than matched by their PLO enemies' belief that the Arab world would come to their aid and the Jordanian monarchy would soon fall.

In fact, the bloody conflict dragged on for weeks. The Jordanian Army was not equipped nor trained for urban warfare. The 60$^{th}$ Armor Brigade, which carried the brunt of the initial attacks did not coordinate well with accompanying infantry and was ineffective. Moreover, units from the two infantry divisions pulled off the Israeli front were composed of a high percentage of Palestinians and small village East Bank Jordanians. Many of the Palestinians deserted and later constituted several PLO battalion-size units in

southern Lebanon. The Second Division's commander Brigadier Bajahat Muhaisein, an East Banker who had married into a prominent Palestinian family, quit. In an ironic turn of events General Zia al-Haq, then head of the Pakistani training mission to Jordan, basically took command and kept the 2nd Division operations going.

The East Bank soldiers, mostly from northern villages or southern tribal groups, were not familiar with the city in which they were now fighting. The situation seemed close to what T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, had described in explaining the vast differences between the urban and rural peoples of Jordan over 50 years earlier. Amman was an alien place to them.

The Jordanian armored units, trying to operate in narrow twisting streets filled with rubble, were easy prey. I saw a number of American M-60 tanks disabled by Soviet anti-tank missiles. After pulling back, the Jordanians resorted to unobserved artillery attacks using almost their entire reserve of ammunition. Since the artillery fire was not directed by observers pinpointing targets, it tended to be haphazard and counter-productive. Palestinian civilians were often the casualties. They also brought in twin 40mm anti-aircraft weapons manned by air force personnel, which put on massive pyrotechnics displays while doing very little damage.

Nor was the artillery fire particularly well coordinated with infantry or armor advances. In fact, the heavy limestone structure of many buildings made them vulnerable to only the heaviest of weapons. Even 106mm recoilless anti-tank rifles did little damage to most of the buildings. From my perch in the old American embassy building in *Jabal Luwaybdah*, I could clearly see the Jordanian attempts to root out the Palestinian guerillas from *Jabal Ashrifiyah*, one of their strongholds. The attack columns would start out with the infantry close behind but as the volume of fire from the Palestinian positions increased the infantry would fall behind and the tank would soon be isolated. Tanks would fire their main gun at individual Palestinian snipers. Four or five Palestinian fighters would fire upon advancing Jordanian troops, inflicting casualties, and when finally located by the Jordanians, would simply move a hundred meters to another house and resume firing.

However, the volume of fire and explosions was being reported by the Western media as a near-genocide by "enraged bedouin troops," raping and slaughtering as they moved into Palestinian areas. In reality, the battle was fought with very little hand-to-hand fighting and usually subsided at night. Moreover, the vast majority of the press was holed up in the Intercontinental hotel, reporting on the war from infrequent glimpses through the windows and repeating rumors and stories related to them by the hotel staff, most of whom were Palestinians. The telephone exchanges were in the hands of the rebels and telephonic communications were sporadic at best.

The Western media was also far more comfortable with the better-educated and politically savvy Palestinian leadership than with the Jordanian military, and the reporting reflected that fact. A leader in championing the Palestinian cause was the BBC Arabic service, which dwelled on alleged Jordanian atrocities and Palestinian "successes." Nasser's Voice of the Arabs radio station from Cairo, which backed the PLO, had a powerful influence on the large numbers of Arabs who listened to it faithfully. The heavy-handed approach of the Jordanian government also contributed to their "image "problem. They had made very little, if any, provision or plans for handling thousands of people locked into an urban battle ground with no escape

routes and, after a while, no water. The ubiquitous water tanks on top of the houses were almost all riddled with bullet and shrapnel holes and the city water mains were broken.

Meanwhile in other parts of Jordan, the Jordanian Arab Army was turning the tide. Al-Salt, hometown of Christian DFLP leader Nayif Hawatmeh, was retaken; gradually villages along the Ghor valley were also regained by Government troops; and throughout the conflict, the south always remained in government control.

There were two wild cards in the Jordanian civil war and at first glance both seemed favorable for the PLO. Syria, portraying itself as the paragon of Arab nationalism, had always been hostile to the Hashemites. Iraq, with a large military force remaining in Jordan since the 1967 war, had also been outspokenly favorable to Arafat's forces.

But these appearances were misleading. The faction then taking over in Syria, led by Hafiz al-Asad, was hostile toward Arafat while, in the end, Baghdad's relatively new leader, Saddam Hussein, decided that he preferred good relations with Jordan. His units withdrew, amid Palestinian charges that Iraqi units had coordinated their movements with the Jordanian Army to make it harder for the PLO seizing control of ammunition, bases and areas. These two choices would continue to affect decisions many years later, with Asad always suspicious of Arafat and Saddam generally enjoying Jordanian help (or favorable neutrality) including his 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Arafat, however, did not hold any grudge against Saddam who he worked with closely in later years.

At the same time, though, Syria was still mainly governed by Asad's rival, Salah Jadid. On September 20, Syria's army invaded Jordan using both regular forces and PLO army units from the Palestine Liberation Army. At first, the Jordanians were being overwhelmed, losing a number of tanks from their premier armored unit, the 40th Armored Brigade, and were forced to pull back. However under effective Jordanian air attacks, the Syrians suffered heavy losses. A senior fighter pilot in the Jordanian Air Force told me it was a veritable "turkey shoot" with the Syrian tanks being easily seen and hit in the gently rolling open terrain of northern Jordan.

However General Asad refused to put his planes into the air to provide cover for two reasons. One was his own dislike of Arafat, who he saw as a client of the rival Jadid faction. The other was Israel's warning, made at Jordan's request through the U.S. embassy in Amman, that its forces would intervene if the Syrian offensive continued. The demoralized Syrian forces dragged themselves home, towing dozens of destroyed tanks with them, and within a few weeks Asad seized power in Damascus. King Hussein, always careful to look to the future, resisted recommendations from the military to vigorously pursue the Syrians, and allowed the Syrians to evacuate in a leisurely fashion, carrying back almost all their destroyed equipment. He correctly decided that any further damage inflicted on the Syrians might unite a Syrian government coming apart.

As the Iraqis pulled out and the Syrians retreated in humiliation, the Palestinian leadership realized defeat was inevitable and began negotiating. However, the Jordanians had concluded that they could not make a deal with Arafat that he would implement faithfully. Urged on by the military leadership and Prince Hasan, King Hussein maintained his position, demanding the PLO's full military withdrawal from Jordan.

An agreement was reached in Cairo, under the supervision of the ailing Nasser, Arafat's patron, who died the day after it

was signed on September 28. With Nasser gone and Jordan's Arab neighbors in political disarray, King Hussein proceeded slowly and surely to evict the remainder of the PLO and other Palestinian armed groups from Jordan. By July 1971, the last remnant of the PLO was holed up in the Ajlun hills. I watched one of the last Jordanian assaults on these PLO positions. It was an uneven contest with the Palestinians replying to Jordanian artillery and tank fire with katusha rocket attacks that were so ineffective that the Jordanian soldiers did not even take cover. When one exploded seemingly close by, I "hit the deck" as I had numerous times during Viet Cong mortar attacks, eliciting gales of laughter from the soldiers nearby.

A few days later the Palestinians surrendered and one group of about 200 waded across the Jordan River to surrender to the Israelis rather than face the wrath of the East Bank soldiers. But apparently my brief appearance at the battle site was enough to put me on a PLO "hit list." It was soon claimed that I had been "directing" the Jordanian assault in Ajlun.

While most Palestinians and Jordanians did not directly participate in the war, to say that it was not a civil war is like saying that because most American southerners and northerners did not participate in the war of 1861 it was not a civil war. The Jordanian conflict lives on with lingering bitterness, split families, and neighbors. People were dragged from their cars and killed based on their identity cards. The Jordanian soldiers of an armored unit told me they pulled down the trousers of Palestinian prisoners and sat them on the hot engine compartment of their tanks. There was looting and individual acts of murder on both sides. In the politically correct jargon of Arab politics it became known as "the era of regrettable events."

In my trips back to Jordan over the years it has been my observation that the scars of the civil war have not healed. It marked the complex development of Palestinian-Jordanian relations in the 1970s and 1980s. The arrival of thousands of Palestinians expelled from Kuwait in 1991, bringing with them considerable amounts of money, have reopened some old wounds. I was told by a retired army general "They [Palestinians] build big villas on the hills and add nothing to this country." Certainly it is true that few Palestinian officers--or soldiers for that matter--serve in combat units today. In my most recent visit, I observed what seems to be a parallel process of modernization characterized by an emerging trendy, upper-class youth with water pipes installed in their Mercedes and young girls in a night club attired in tight body suits talking from table to table with cell phones, developing alongside a very definite Islamization of the society. For instance, the dress of the young women of Yarmouk University was decidedly conservative. However, in neither case did I detect any erasure of the old Jordanian-Palestinian fissure as some writers on Jordan have described recently.

The 1970-71 fighting, though brief, was a bitter conflict with all the earmarks of a civil war based on ethnic division. It could be said there was no real difference in language, religion, culture or history separating the two sides; yet, even if one believes that the split did not exist before, the 1970 war clearly created one.

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**NOTES**

1. Major Perry was most probably killed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).