

# Crossroads of intrigue and exotica

**T**his dusty, sunwashed city may not be the Vatican of world terror that Washington's propagandists like to describe, but it certainly is a mecca for all sorts of revolutionary movements and strange political flora and fauna. For lovers of intrigue and exotica, Tripoli is the place to be this spring.

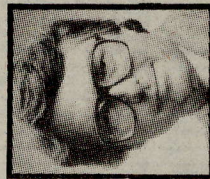
Here I met Dr. George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh, who, after Abu Nidal, are the most wanted men in the world. Wanted dead or alive, that is, by Israel and the U.S. who brand them the worst terrorists since Carlos the Jackal.

Habash, a soft-spoken Christian Palestinian, heads the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Hawatmeh, warm, charming and outgoing, is leader of the hard-line Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Both are dedicated Marxists, an unusual affiliation for Arabs, and both bitterly hate the U.S., which they blame for their loss of Palestine.

To many, though not all Arabs, Habash and Hawatmeh are "eagles of the Palestinian resistance." To the Israelis, they are prime targets. Last year the Israelis thought the two were on board a jet flying to Damascus. Israeli aircraft hijacked the plane and forced it down in Israel only to discover that Habash and Hawatmeh had decided at the last moment to take a later flight.

When I met them, the two leaders were on their way to Algiers for a reconciliation meeting with the PLO's Yasser Arafat. The three were to try and work out some sort of compromise on opening peace talks with Israel, though Habash and Hawatmeh remain generally opposed to any such efforts.

Off on the sidelines was the infamous Abu Nidal, intent upon fulfilling his vow to kill any Palestinian who dared



## Eric ARGOLIS in Tripoli

to discuss a settlement with Israel. Libya, as Moammar Khadafy admitted to me, still supports Nidal, though it opposes his horrifying attacks on civilians. Attacks, Nidal supporters readily admit, designed to abort any peace talks between Israel and the Arabs.

Tripoli plays host to more than PLO factions. One sees tall, jet black Malians with their distinctive small heads; curious Burkinabes from ex-Upper Volta; clever, animated Ghanians; veiled Tuareg warriors from the wastes of the Sahara; dark Sudanese from Khordofan with jutting tribal scars on their cheeks; and their blood foes, the Dinka from high up on the Nile; incredibly skinny, swarthy Chadians with bushy afros, dusty combat jackets and red eyes.

There are chunky Korean laborers who seem to be building everything in Libya; Germans and British manning radar installations and running communications; carping French businessmen and natty Italian salesmen; energetic Greeks or Cypriots; neighboring Maltese — and who knows what.

Everywhere one goes, there are East Europeans and Russians in mufti, the latter in cheap polyester outfits, their aluminum teeth shining alarmingly in the sunlight.

And, of course, eddies and swirls of Libyan students in motley combat gear, trying to look warlike but ending up appearing confused and scruffy.

Then there are the occasional mysterious delegations that whip through the streets with an escort of motorcycle outriders; a big, old green Cadillac with snapping pennants used to impress visiting African bigwigs, described to me by one scornful Libyan as "that black-mobile." Africans come to Libya for cash handouts, not for love. Other oddities, too: Why did the people described to me as being attendees at a "poet's convention" all have brawny bodyguards?

Tripoli is the kind of place where everyone speaks in whispers. You don't ask anyone why they are there but naturally you wonder, and they wonder just as much about you. Everyone, it is assumed, is up to something. Except for the wretched journalists, doomed to what I call Arab hotel torture, which means sitting in the lobby, waiting for interviews that never come, listening to patriotic songs in Arabic, the Libyan form of Muzak.

One person did talk, however. He was a sad-looking government minister from a horrid little West African police state. In hushed tones, he related how the President for Life had summoned him and four other ministers to his office. Without more ado, the President pulled out a revolver and shot four of the ministers dead, explaining, "I am tired of these people."

Aside from this wretch, all the rest of us odd denizens of Tripoli seemed to greatly enjoy that glorious, soft, warm sunshine of the North African spring, about which Albert Camus wrote so lovingly.

Ah, springtime in Tripoli.