

P.L.O. to Use Posters to Get Its Message Across

By Robert Pear, Special To the New York Times

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In a novel move to improve its image in the United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization has hired an expert on graphic design to convey its message more effectively to the American people through political poster art.

The expert, Daniel J. Walsh, based in Alexandria, Va., has one of the world's largest collections of Palestinian posters, including 4,000 to 5,000 first editions. He has been retained to disseminate such art at universities and art galleries around the country. He also plans to reprint some of the posters and sell them through bookstores and mail-order catalogues.

He confirmed today that he had a contract with the P.L.O., signed in March, when he was invited to the group's headquarters in Tunis. But he declined to say how much he was being paid. 'Oppositional Posters'

Mr. Walsh, a 40-year-old veteran of the Peace Corps, is the proprietor of Liberation Graphics, a small company that distributes what he calls "oppositional posters" from the Soviet Union, Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa and other countries.

"The political myths surrounding the P.L.O. are susceptible to challenge and reversal," Mr. Walsh said in an interview in the tiny house that he uses as an office and workshop. "The political poster is a way to shatter taboos and debunk mythologies."

Since the founding of the P.L.O. more than two decades ago, Palestinians have recognized the poster as a medium for expressing their political values and goals. Mr. Walsh says that Palestinian posters will speak to an American audience more directly and more effectively than P.L.O. leaders have been able to. Demand Exceeding Supply

The Palestinian uprising, which began in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in December 1987, "has really caused a sea change in American attitudes toward the Palestinians," Mr. Walsh said.

"More and more U.S. artists are producing Palestinian posters," he said, "and more people are buying them. Sales are up. My biggest problem now is getting enough Palestinian posters to satisfy the demand."

Since January, Mr. Walsh said, he has sold 3,000 Palestinian posters, or nearly three times the number sold in the first half of 1988.

The posters, created by Palestinians, Israelis, Poles, Cubans, Italians and Americans, range from militant celebrations of armed struggle to lyrical evocations of a world at peace.

One poster is dedicated to "Palestinian women on the front line of the intifada," the uprising. It shows a big stone embellished with strips of colorful Palestinian embroidery. In the background is the outline of a woman hurling a stone. Guerrilla as Hero

Another, by a Cuban artist, shows a Palestinian guerrilla as a heroic figure, cradling a rifle in his right arm. The guerrilla is a vigorous, robust fighter with a radiant smile. "It shatters the stereotype of the Palestinian as a mindless terrorist," Mr. Walsh said.

In another, a Palestinian boy is shown lying on his back, with a stone in his open hand. A Palestinian flag covers the body as a shroud. At the top of the poster, in English and Arabic, is the slogan, "Homeland or Death:

We Shall Be Victorious."

The artists often use militant images and messages in posters meant to inspire Palestinians engaged in armed struggle. They use gentler imagery to appeal to American tastes and values. For example, a poster produced by Mr. Walsh last year shows a sloe-eyed woman in a tranquil domestic scene, carrying a basket of fruit.

"The woman symbolizes Palestine, and the fruit is a reminder of the fertility of the land," Mr. Walsh said.

Mr. Walsh said universities and galleries had expressed interest but had not made firm commitments to display his Palestinian posters. He acknowledged that the proposed exhibitions might run afoul of a 1987 Federal statute that made it unlawful to spend money from the P.L.O. or to "receive anything of value except informational material from the P.L.O."

Mr. Walsh called the law "a form of censorship" intended to "stifle American expressions of solidarity with Palestinians and their struggle." Civil Liberties Union's Stance

Kate Martin, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union, said that in her view, the law violated the First Amendment. "If the Government takes legal action against Dan for accepting money from the P.L.O. to organize a poster exhibit, we would defend him because we think the law is unconstitutional," she said.

So far the Government has given no indication of its plans. The Government invoked another provision of the same law last year in an unsuccessful attempt to close the P.L.O. observer mission to the United Nations.

Jonathan S. Kessler, a fund-raiser for the National PAC, a bipartisan pro-Israel political action committee, said that many of Mr. Walsh's posters were frightening because they "glorify and romanticize violence against the Jewish people."

Mr. Kessler said the posters should be recognized as "products of a propaganda machine that simplifies an extremely complex conflict by presenting just one side." But he said that distributors of such posters "have a right to distribute them."

"The artistry and poetry of the posters should not lead us to forget that they are weapons in the P.L.O.'s battle to delegitimize the State of Israel," Mr. Kessler said. "Let's allow the American people to decide whether the posters are propaganda or art," Mr. Walsh replied.