



2005 FTW Ride

September 15-24, 2005

Event Highlights



Coffee at Bedouin tents in Bosra, Syria.

The 2005 ride was distinguished by our entry into Palestine for the first time. Unlike 2004, we also went to the Golan Heights. The 2005 ride had been slated for the spring but was postponed to September on account of the tragic assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005. Even seven months later when we arrived in Lebanon, one could still feel the emotional effects of his death throughout the land. On the 2005 ride approximately 166 women from 17 countries participated.



LEBANON

Rafik Hariri was a beloved self-made billionaire who used his money to rebuild Beirut after the civil wars. Hariri had twice been a Prime Minister of Lebanon. FTW visited his tomb in Beirut which was a place of reverence months after his death. In 2004 his sister Bahia Hariri publicly hosted us in Sidon but this year she was advised to stay home. She exhibited her support for FTW by inviting the entire team to her residence. She met with each team and expressed her support and gratitude for our efforts.



Bahia Hariri with the U.S. team.

Sabra & Shatila Our visit to Lebanon coincided with the 23rd anniversary of the Sabra Shatila massacre on September 16-18, 1982. The exact number of Palestinians killed by the Lebanese Christian militia under the supervising aegis of the Israeli military who had invaded the country varies from as low as 323 persons to a high of 3500 dead. An independent commission by Nobel Peace prize winner Sean McBride concluded that Israel's invasion was unlawful and Israel was involved in the massacres.

The FTW team found itself in the midst of a demonstration commemorating the event. Some women felt discomfited, while others welcomed the opportunity to be present on this memorable occasion. The demonstrators and FTW went to the Sabra Shatila memorial park where many of the killings took place. FTW founder Detta Regan laid a wreath in FTW's name.



Sabra Shatila Demonstration.

Last year only a handful of women went inside the Sabra Shatila camps. This year all the teams went. We met many people, including survivors of the massacres. We heard very painful stories of innocent unarmed civilian murders. We also heard about the grave problems of contemporary life in this refugee camp. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are not allowed to work or travel abroad. The United Nations refugee agency argues with the Lebanese government over who is responsible for garbage pick-up in the camps, so consequently garbage accumulates and sits for days.

Getting a short glimpse of refugee life was enlightening. Any just peace for Palestine must include the right of refugees to return to their homes inside Israel where they fled in 1948 and 1967 with little more than the clothes on their back.



Above, boys at Sabra Shatila demonstration. Right, Palestinian Sahar Saleh of UAE FTW Team at Memorial Park in front of photos of massacre.





SYRIA

Golan Heights. The most momentous day in Syria was biking to the Golan Heights and the destroyed town of Quneitra. We were transferred by bus to the edge of the area to start biking. It was an eerie bike ride because the land is still in a war-torn state. The walls of a one-time hospital are bullet-ridden. Houses are collapsed in great heaps of concrete. United Nations vehicles and soldiers patrol the all but impassable border. It is very quiet because no one lives around here anymore, just a few shepherds with their flocks. Photo, right, we are standing in Syria and houses in the distance are in the Syrian Golan Heights occupied by Israel since 1967.



The Shouting Hill in Golan, on the Syrian side looking out to the occupied side.

After the 1967 War, Syrians could not return to their villages which had existed on the part of the Golan Heights now occupied by Israel. Nor could the villagers there, most of whom were Druze, enter Syria. Families were separated. Since Israel and Syria are still in a state of war there is no mail or courier service between the two countries. This led to the Shouting Hill. With megaphones and binoculars, families and friends shout to each other across the 3 kilometer valley. Nowadays cellphones are more common.



Left, girls at Quneitra presenting riders with flowers — destroyed hospital in background. Right, United Nations troops at Golan.

We were welcomed to Golan with flowers by young girls and music and dancing. After an hour or so, we walked up to the Shouting Hill. We could make out people on the occupied side waving to us and we waved back with silk scarves given to us by our Syrian hosts. Dozens of women waved the scarves which were the color of the Syrian flag and must have looked poignant from the other side. Many of us had tears in our eyes. We heard one woman on our side calling out in anguish, "Where is mother? I thought mother would be here today." But the relative on the other side said "Mother could not come today." (This was in Arabic and translated for us). The movie *The Syrian Bride* tells a story about the separation of families.



Top, Dancing at Quneitra in front of destroyed hospital

Above, Madame Assad 3rd from left with orange bike talking to Pia Gallegos of the U.S. team.

Upper left, various bikers with Madame Assad, including Colleen McGuire of the U.S. team

Lower left, Tagi Abdelrab (Palestinian refugee, Lebanon) with Madame Assad.



This year **Madame Asma al-Assad** cycled with us the entire 40 kilometer back road to Bosra. She was at the head of the starting line-up with her own bike. Her burly guards surrounded her. We started chanting, "Men to the back. Follow the women." They got the message and retreated to the back of the bike group. Madame Assad was exceedingly accessible and congenial. Everyone got a chance to bike beside her, chat with her and pose for photos at pit stops. Her blouse says "I'm a winner"



JORDAN

Top, Detta Regan, Fotouh Younis, Her Majesty Queen Rania. Below, Queen Rania, with white cap. Bottom, British cyclist with students at University of Science & Technology.

Queen Rania How exciting to cycle with royalty! Queen Rania's visit to a village in northern Jordan coincided with Follow the Women's arrival in Jordan at the northern border where she visited us at a pit stop. The Queen graciously extended her patronage to the 2005. She talked directly with FTW founder Detta and Fatouh Younes, the coordinator of the Jordanian team. The Queen then biked a very short distance, only about a mile, but her presence was appreciated and filmed for Jordanian television.



The first leg of cycling was 15 km from the Jordanian border to the University of Science and Technology where we mixed with students and ate lunch. We then cycled 18 kilometers to Yarmouk University near Irbid where we spent the night on the university's gymnasium floor.





PALESTINE



An Israeli checkpoint known as the Allenby Bridge is sandwiched between the Jordanian and Palestinian borders. It took hours to get through the Israeli checkpoint. We were supposed to reach Jericho by 2:00 pm but it was dusk by the time the Israelis gave the final rider her visa paper. Between Allenby and the Palestine border is a sublime stretch of deserted no-man's-land which the Israelis allowed us to bike across. The half hour ride took us to the Palestine border where we were greeted with tears and cheers. It seemed an implausible dream that so many women would bicycle to their country.



Upper photo, cycling across the no-man's land between Allenby Bridge and Palestine borders with Israeli vehicle escort. Top left, entering Palestine. Top right, Lina Arafat entering Jericho.



Meeting with Israelis. The most startling event of the 2005 ride was meeting a small group of twelve Israelis at the Qalandiya checkpoint. The rendezvous had been in the works for about a month before the ride but it was not until 11:00 p.m. the night before that the Palestinians agreed to the meeting. They were understandably, reasonably, appropriately cautious and suspicious. The Israeli men and women were not from one organization but were progressive. The main contact Shari Barr was involved with a group called Middle Way who made silent walks from Jaffa to Jerusalem with Israelis, Arabs, Muslim, Jews, Christians, men, women.

Yassir Arafat's tomb in Ramallah as it looked in September, 2005 almost one year after his death .

The scene at the Qalandiya check point was rather chaotic and not the best place to get acquainted with the Israelis. Apparently the Palestinians felt comfortable enough with the Israelis that they invited them to our lunch at Ramallah. The Palestinians also invited Shari to speak to the group, which she did, and it was from the heart and very sincere and she spoke about trust and justice and peace.



The Israeli group included two young Arab women from Nazareth (of Palestinian families who had not fled in 1948) who had never been to or met anyone from the Occupied Territories. Most of the Palestinian FTW women had never met Israeli civilians. Anyone who was there will confirm it was a profound event. During the 2009 ride when one of the Palestinians involved in the Ramallah lunch was asked why the contacts were not maintained with the Israelis, the reply was simple: "Things got worse." Yes, after the 2005 ride there was the invasion of Lebanon in 2006, the long siege of Gaza and the Gazan invasion in late 2008, early 2009 — not to mention the torment of daily life under a brutal foreign military occupation.

Taclan Topal of the Turkish team at the Qalandiya checkpoint.