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Author(s): Yezid Sayigh

Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Summer, 1997), pp. 17-32

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2537904>

Accessed: 19/01/2015 07:07

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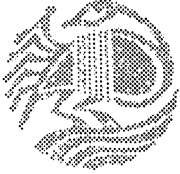
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## ARMED STRUGGLE AND STATE FORMATION

YEZID SAYIGH

*Armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine has been a rallying cry of the Palestinian national movement since its emergence in the 1960s, but its results have never been more than marginal. Instead, military groups have served a primarily political function, offering Palestinians in the diaspora organizational structures for political expression and state building. However, the nature of the PLO as an exile entity attempting to unite a disparate diaspora has necessarily resulted in an authoritarian leadership wary of the administrative, civilian, and social organizations needed to form a state. Ultimately, the political patterns that developed during the armed struggle impede as much as aid the realization of an independent Palestinian state.*

WHEN THE PLO AND ISRAEL SIGNED the Declaration of Principles on 13 September 1993, an entire era in modern Palestinian history came to an end. Thousands on both sides died since the war that had led to the creation of the Jewish state in Palestine and to the mass exodus of the Arab population in 1948. The Palestinian national movement, established with the express aim of liberating Palestine through armed struggle, had proved unable in the intervening years to liberate any part of its national soil by force and had finally accepted the Oslo negotiated compromise, whose terms ran counter to virtually all the principles and aims it had espoused for so long. What role, then, did the much-vaunted armed struggle play in contemporary Palestinian history, and what factors determined its course and outcome?

Throughout their evolution, the guerrilla groups composing the PLO consistently described armed struggle as the principal, even the exclusive, means of liberating Palestine. Yet their military effort never exceeded a certain level in terms of scale and impact and certainly failed to approach the Chinese and Vietnamese models of people's war frequently cited. Whatever the individual sacrifices of the Palestinian rank and file or the strength of their convictions, the movement as a whole lacked the single-minded determination to take the practice of armed struggle to the elevated position it occupied in formal ideology. Eclecticism and improvisation became con-

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**YEZID SAYIGH** is assistant director of studies at the Centre of International Studies, Cambridge University. This article is an abbreviated version of the concluding chapter of his book, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-93*, which will be published by Oxford University Press and the Institute for Palestine Studies in fall 1997.

*Journal of Palestine Studies* XXVI, no. 4 (Summer 1997), pp. 17-32.

firmed parts of the political and organizational culture. Despite the movement's extensive bureaucratization, frequent usage of the term *intifada* to describe mass actions revealed the enduring strength of traditional forms of nonorganized participation, such as the village *faz'a*, and exposed the leadership's disinclination to incorporate the mass constituency into structured political organizations. The fact that the Palestinian movement was able for so long to accommodate such a marked discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, between slogans and capabilities, and between nationalist myth and social requirement suggests that performance was not measured in conventional military terms and that armed struggle served other primary functions.

### THE VACUUM AFTER 1948

Above all, the armed struggle provided the central theme and practice around which Palestinian nation building took place. The establishment of Israel in most of Palestine in 1948 deprived the Palestinians of the national base in which territory, economy, and society met. *Al-nakba* (the catastrophe) decisively ended any hope for the emergence of a Palestinian nation-state. The loss of land and other means of production undermined the sense of identity in what was a predominantly agrarian society and removed its sources of autonomous wealth and economic reproduction. The impact was compounded by the physical dispersal of the population and its subjection to separate, often rival, Arab authorities in its various places of refuge.

National politics could not reappear under these circumstances. The absence of a single territorial, economic, and social base meant that there was no longer the basis for a common political "arena," with agreed modes of competition and structured means for the selection of a new generation of leadership. Besides, commonality with other Arabs of language, culture, and religion blunted any tendency to revive a Palestinian agenda distinct from that of the Arab host societies. The experience of *al-nakba* made for a distinct Palestinianness, but not necessarily for Palestinianism. Palestinians sought national salvation by joining Arab opposition parties or hoped that new Arab leaders would come to power and launch their armies to destroy Israel and liberate Palestine. This explains the enduring strength of the pan-Arab appeal among Palestinians in the 1950s and early 1960s, reflected above all in widespread support for Egyptian president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir.

The reverse side of the coin was the extreme sensitivity of the Arab states toward political activity among the Palestinian refugees who came into their midst in 1948. The host governments responded either by isolating the Palestinian refugees from their own populations through physical and legal barriers or by inhibiting the emergence of social and political organizations with an explicitly Palestinian character. For all these reasons Palestinian political activism after 1948 was unfocused, operated at the grass-roots level, and was often channelled into Arab parties espousing radical national, social, or religious agendas. The reemergence of distinctly Palestinian nationalist politics

depended primarily on the progress made by the scattered Palestinian communities in rebuilding their “sociological space,” that is, reviving their social networks, value systems and norms, and cultural symbols. This was a painstaking process, and it was not until the early 1960s that Palestinian society approached the “critical mass” required to generate its own, overt politics and to sustain an autonomous national movement. It was no coincidence that the Palestinians should have reached this stage soon after the hopes pinned on pan-Arabism were dashed by the collapse of the Egyptian-Syrian union in September 1961 and the resurgence of the Arab cold war.

The general disillusionment with Arab politics in the early 1960s showed that the Palestinians had not been politically incorporated in any meaningful way by host governments. The buildup of pressure in this period was evident in the proliferation of dozens of small, self-styled liberation groups espousing armed struggle. It was to defuse and contain irredentism that the Arab heads of state approved the formation of the PLO in 1964. However, PLO founder Ahmad al-Shuqayri substantially exceeded his mandate and presented the Arab leaders with a *fait accompli* by creating a statelike body, with a constitution, executive, legislative assembly, “government” departments, army, audited budget, and internal statutes. The PLO even imposed limited taxes and conscription on the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip with Egyptian assistance and requested similar facilities in other Arab states.

The PLO could not live up to the expectations of its public, not least because both its political authority and military operation were subordinated firmly to Arab command. Jordan, moreover, had strongly influenced the selection of delegates to the founding conference of the PLO. As importantly, the PLO provided the “state” but no institutions for mass participation in national politics. Shuqayri and his colleagues suffered the same dilemma as Nasir, who lacked a political vehicle to mobilize grass-roots support for government policies but distrusted political parties. The PLO imitated Nasir’s decision to form an official, government-led movement modelled on his National Union and its successor, the Arab Socialist Union. The PLO body was banned in most Arab states and allowed to operate only in Gaza, but its main undoing was that it had been created from above, by decree, and therefore had little life of its own. As a result, the PLO failed in two key respects: It neither took the military initiative against Israel nor provided its mass constituency with channels for political participation.

The humiliating defeat inflicted by Israel on the Arab states in June 1967 weakened them both physically and politically, making it difficult for them to move too forcefully against the Palestinian guerrilla groups that now appeared on the scene. The decision by Fatah and others to launch an armed insurrection against Israel in the newly-occupied West Bank and Gaza brought them more widely to public attention. Their March 1968 stand against a superior Israeli force in the battle of Karama in Jordan catapulted them to center stage and enabled them to take control of the PLO over the

next year; by 1969 the guerrilla movement had established itself as a regional actor in its own right. Its espousal of armed struggle and adoption of grass-roots organization enabled it to mobilize the Palestinian constituency and at last translate “potential politicization into political action.”<sup>1</sup>

### ARMED STRUGGLE AND PALESTINIAN NATION BUILDING

The Palestinian guerrilla movement remained a modest force in terms of combat strength and military effectiveness. Even in their heyday in 1968–70, the guerrillas had numbered fewer than 10,000 and their attacks against Israel were never more than an irritant. More significant was the contribution made by the armed struggle to the historical process of Palestinian nation building. Specifically, it led to four interlinked consequences.

First was confirmation of Palestinian national identity, which had started to be reformed with the social reconstruction of the 1950s. The launch of the armed struggle in 1965 became a reassertion of Palestinian existence and autonomous will, evidence of determination to pursue an independent

course. The heroic imagery and language of armed struggle gave new substance to the imagined community of the Palestinians, who now saw themselves as a revolutionary people waging an active struggle to determine their fate, rather than as a mass of helpless refugees passively awaiting charity handouts. The

*The launch of the armed struggle in 1965 became a reassertion of Palestinian autonomous will.*

leadership was consciously aware of this function: Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), for example, noted that the armed struggle, “a central, comprehensive and multidimensional process,” is “how we have proceeded to rebuild our people and reassert its national identity, in order to achieve its aims of return and liberation of the land. We understand [the armed struggle] as an integrated process involving three dimensions: organization, production, and combat.”<sup>2</sup>

A second consequence was to give institutional embodiment to this Palestinian national identity through the takeover of the PLO by the guerrilla movement in 1969. The shock delivered by Israel to the Arab states in June 1967 had produced cracks that the Palestinian guerrilla groups were quick to widen. Armed struggle effectively kept open a space, a margin of freedom from Arab government control, within which Palestinian organizations could flourish. This was reflected in the formal agreements with the governments of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria that enshrined the right of the guerrilla movement to maintain an autonomous presence on their national soil and wage a military campaign against Israel from their borders. To the extent that this detracted from the sovereignty of the host states, the assertion of a parallel “guerrilla government,” however embryonic, laid the basis for thinking and organizing in statist terms. Another result of the takeover of the PLO was that

it permitted the guerrilla leadership to assume the mantle of diplomatic recognition already accorded to the PLO and to operate on a larger regional and international stage.

A third consequence of the armed struggle for Palestinian nation building was that it produced a common political “arena.” It defined objectives around which the broad constituency could be mobilized and provided the channels through which mass participation in national politics could take place. The guerrilla groups were the political parties, and their members could compete and rise in the ranks according to defined rules and informal criteria. Its parliament in exile, the Palestine National Council (PNC), provided an additional means of incorporating various sectors of the Palestinian population, as did the affiliated mass organizations (trade unions and social associations). Participation in the armed struggle was the main source of legitimacy and distinguished the guerrilla leadership that emerged after 1967 from the founding generation of the PLO.

The fourth consequence of the armed struggle, arguably the most central and enduring, involved a process akin to state building, which also demonstrated the degree to which the restoration of national identity, reaffirmation of the imagined community, and institutionalization of the representative entity had progressed. State building in the Palestinian case involved the establishment of quasi-governmental services providing medical care and social welfare to the mass constituency. It was equally obvious in the obsessive insistence on obtaining from both Arab and non-Arab governments recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. A mark that the statist model was being emulated was the rapid proliferation of the offices that the guerrilla groups vied to set up in every camp, village, and city neighborhood possible, the closest they could come to the ubiquitousness of government bureaucracy. The statist ethos was evident too in the use of nationalism as a legitimizing instrument rather than a mobilizing one, especially after the defeat in Jordan in 1970–71. Equally important was the role of the guerrilla groups, which acted as the equivalent of political parties in their competition for public support and for a share of power within the PLO. Through them and the mass organizations, the Palestinian leadership found the means to incorporate and integrate its scattered society.

The special circumstances of the PLO—its lack of political power over a single territory, unified population, and autonomous economy—inevitably distorted and truncated the state-building process. It was a shadow process that existed largely in form and gained substance only to the extent that the PLO could carve out a secure sanctuary and construct a state-within-a-state in an Arab host country, as occurred at different periods in Jordan and Lebanon.

## DETERMINING FACTORS

The evolution of the Palestinian armed struggle was determined by three main factors. First was the complex and all-important relationship with Arab host societies, since the leadership and main body of the PLO were based in exile. The need to establish secure sanctuaries brought the Palestinian guerrillas into conflict with the Arab governments concerned and invited punitive Israeli reprisals, increasing the burden on civilian populations and national economies. Opposition to the presence of these sanctuaries from government quarters or communities prompted the guerrillas to seek protection through developing their military capabilities, invoking the help of external allies, and building alliances with local parties and social forces. Their intervention in domestic politics inevitably exacerbated latent tensions in the host society and fuelled civil strife. Nowhere was this more obvious than in Lebanon, where the PLO emerged as a major power broker and constructed a state-in-exile in 1973–82.

The relationship with Jordan was more complex. At its core was the unceasing rivalry over who represented the Palestinians, especially those with Jordanian citizenship living on the east and west banks of the Jordan River. The kingdom also had the longest border with Israel of any Arab state and controlled the main access routes to the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Loss of this major base in 1970–71 weakened the PLO and increased its reliance on its sanctuary in Lebanon. It also increased PLO dependence on Syria, which wielded considerable influence in Lebanon, controlled the overland movement of guerrilla supplies and reinforcements, and perceived itself as a claimant both to Arab leadership and to a special say in the Palestine question. Indeed, Syria arguably exerted the greatest direct influence of any Arab state on the course and politics of the Palestinian armed struggle. Iraq and Saudi Arabia also figured prominently, but of more direct importance was Egypt, whose military and diplomatic support were sought by the PLO and whose decision to conclude a separate peace with Israel led to a fundamental shift in the regional strategic balance.

The second major factor determining the evolution of Palestinian politics was the division between “inside” and “outside,” especially after the remainder of Mandate Palestine came under Israeli control in June 1967. The West Bank and Gaza were too small to sustain a conventional guerrilla war, let alone permit the establishment of sanctuaries or liberated zones. This reduced Palestinian military action in the occupied territories and Israel largely to urban terrorism and made it easier for the IDF and security services to seal off the borders and deal with resistance using police methods. It also compelled the guerrilla movement to remain in exile, continuing its military operations from across borders. With the leadership went the center of gravity in Palestinian national politics.

The PLO, unable to resolve the inside-outside dichotomy, experienced a constant tension between its two wings reflected in the contrasting forms of

struggle adopted by each. The military action used by the outside was an essential means to assert a distinct Palestinian identity within the wider Arab identity and to carve out and define the Palestinian entity amidst the Arab state system. Armed struggle was also the most effective means of mobilizing the scattered Palestinian diaspora. The reverse side of the coin was that the PLO tended to overlook or belittle nonmilitary forms of struggle waged by Palestinians in the occupied territories. Although it did attach greater importance to the political role of the West Bank and Gaza and devoted major efforts to mass action and social organization beginning in the late 1970s, even then it feared competition from local leaders and sought to subordinate them firmly to its strategy. It was in this context that the PLO employed patronage to consolidate its political influence (and compete with Jordan) in the occupied territories.

The nature of the Palestinian leadership and its politics constituted the third vital factor determining the evolution of the armed struggle. These were overwhelmingly shaped—to the effective exclusion of social and economic factors—by the fact that the bulk of the PLO's combat strength, civilian membership, and “governing” institutions were based in exile, as was at least half the Palestinian population. The fact that the Palestinian leadership based its legitimacy on its role in the armed struggle against Israel encouraged the tendency toward populist politics and authoritarian control. Both tendencies were inevitable, since the Palestinian guerrilla movement was engaged in a military conflict and had to structure its internal organization and politics accordingly. Another feature of the leadership with important repercussions was the lack of upward mobility through the ranks and the fact that few newcomers joined it from outside the guerrilla groups. The bureaucratization of the movement from the late 1960s onward tended both to consolidate and to ossify membership in the elite, which comprised civilian, military, and paramilitary elements.

### INTERNAL POLITICS AND ORGANIZATION

Given the Palestinian dispersal and vulnerability to the vagaries of inter-Arab rivalries, the major challenge facing the PLO leadership was to maintain national unity among disparate factions and scattered communities in the face of constant intervention by one Arab state or another. This gave rise to the politics of consensus and the lowest common denominator rather than majority rule, since the outvoted group could seek external support and threaten the PLO's claim to be the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians. Consensus politics granted disproportionate influence over decision making to the smallest group so long as it had a seat on PLO bodies; by extension, it gave undue influence to the Arab state backers of proxy groups. There was little incentive to deepen national unity with mergers, therefore, especially as each group could also lay claim to a share of PLO funds and appointments according to an agreed “quota.”



The nationalist emphasis of Palestinian politics coupled with the reliance on the Arab states for material support had a fundamental impact on the social content of the struggle. The Palestinian leftist groups may have used Marxist-Leninist terminology after 1967, but there was little social or economic analysis in their programs. The predominance of nationalist politics and the rapid emergence of a statist option, funded by Arab rent, precluded a transformative project. This was evident in the absence of any systematic effort to construct a "guerrilla economy" in Jordan in 1968–70 or in Lebanon in 1973–82; there was either insufficient awareness of the importance of extracting resources from society or an excessive readiness to replace social mobilization with statist provision and relations based on rent.

The influx of massive financial assistance from the Arab states in the late 1970s reinforced the trend toward rentier politics in the PLO and within each member-group. While patronage on such a large scale had an integrating function in a scattered constituency and helped tie the occupied territories to the PLO, ultimately it distorted the formulation of policy and impeded attainment of national goals. These patterns were typical of neopatrimonial state-building, but they also arose from the particular circumstances of Palestinian nationalism. The catastrophe of 1948 suspended the evolution of social and political organization. The result was to maintain the strength of primordial relationships based on family, clan, regional, and urban-rural cleavages and to hinder the emergence of fundamentally new politics.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the loss of identity and physical dislocation encouraged an obsession with rhetoric and symbols and discouraged functional or instrumental organization. Fatah in

*The loss of identity and physical dislocation after 1948 encouraged an obsession with rhetoric and symbols and discouraged functional organization.*

particular avoided firm structure or "practical ideology," believing that the essence of organization was "constant motion."<sup>4</sup> It was a movement, not a party, and movement meant "continuous action, free of rigid organization, because it is the movement of a people not a movement of a [political group]."<sup>5</sup>

An immediate consequence of the constant flow of recruits and funds was to reinforce autocratic leadership and reduce accountability, whether political, military, or financial. The generation that took control of the PLO in early 1969 proved to be remarkably durable, with virtually no change in its principal personalities in the next quarter of a century. The leaders of the various guerrilla groups clung jealously to their positions, and even in the second echelon changes mainly involved rotation within a very small circle of individuals. Evaluation of performance was superficial as a result, especially in Fatah and the Fatah-dominated PLO. Even in the military sphere the duplication of effort between the guerrilla groups, jealous autonomy, and lack of standardization of training and tactics were striking. Another consequence was to undermine grass-roots mobilization and organization, as the proliferation of paramilitary agencies and payrolls weakened voluntarism and bureaucratized the mass

base. Palestinian trade unions and social associations became extensions of political factions, led by salaried apparatchiks, in typical corporatist fashion.

Arafat, more than anyone else, personified this system. His preference for avoiding confrontations with Arab governments was balanced by his eagerness to play power broker in the hope of weakening his hosts and protecting the Palestinian movement from repression. Similarly, his obsession with independence from Arab control was matched by his willingness to strike deals with various governments, giving them a stake while retaining ultimate decision-making power in his own hands. The personal control that enabled him to prod an often reluctant PLO to accept a diplomatic strategy he did much to develop was secured in part through his policy, apparent from the outset, of creating numerous parallel agencies and departments, first within Fatah and later within the PLO, and of encouraging the emergence of fiefdoms as a means of fragmenting rival power bases. And while he was not unlike many Arab leaders in his distrust for the organized mass base (as seen through his active marginalization of Fatah civilian branches and PLO-affiliated trade unions and social associations), the fact that he did not head a sovereign state or command a national economy accentuated the consequences. Thus, the lack of established organizational channels through which the mass constituency could participate in national politics left a sizeable margin for the operation of other political forces, most notably the Islamists.

### THE REVOLUTION AND AFTER

The limitations of the Palestinian armed struggle did not become obvious until the eruption of civil war in Jordan in September 1970 and the guerrillas' expulsion from the country in 1970–71. The defeat of the guerrillas owed much to their own political and organizational failings, but above all it revealed starkly the true balance of power with regard to the Arab states, which had recovered since the debacle of June 1967 and were actively rebuilding their systems of population control. At the same time, ongoing changes in local societies and economies reinforced the Arab state system and reduced popular vulnerability to the appeals of Palestine and pan-Arabism.

The outcome of the Jordanian conflict dealt the leftist guerrilla groups that had adopted the most extreme slogans and aims a particularly severe blow. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was not to recover for several years, while the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) reacted by crossing the Palestinian floor to take a leading position in the pragmatic camp. The remaining guerrilla groups dwindled or disappeared, among them the extensions of the Syrian and Iraqi wings of the Ba'ath Party. The phase of revolutionary élan gave way to a period of intense ideological and organizational flux that was eventually resolved with the transition into a phase that can best be described as postrevolutionary state

building. The Palestinians had yet to attain a minimum of their territorial goals, and so nationalism remained a potent force that required further conduct of armed struggle, but the statist ambition now clearly dominated the political agenda.

The defeat in Jordan had three significant consequences. First, Fatah emerged as the undisputed leader of the Palestinian national movement. Second, Fatah exploited the discomfit of the leftist groups to assert the PLO as the common arena of Palestinian politics, a process driven above all by Arafat. Finally, references to guerrilla war all but disappeared from official Palestinian rhetoric, despite continued commitment to armed struggle.

The absence of new formulations of military doctrine revealed a strategic predicament, if not an implicit admission that the grand design of liberating Palestine by force was unachievable. Armed struggle had not outlived its purpose, however. The Fatah leadership employed military means to assert its internal control in the wake of the expulsion from Jordan. It embarked on a two-year foray into international terrorism to disguise its predicament and regain the strategic initiative. In an effort to contain internal dissent and rebuild military strength, it ordered a reorganization of guerrilla forces along semiconventional lines and commenced acquisition of heavy weapons. Both efforts proved successful, placing the Fatah-dominated PLO in position to exploit the new political opportunities offered by the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973.

The October war marked a major turning point in the evolution of the Palestinian armed struggle. The Arab states had taken the military offensive to break the diplomatic deadlock and improve their bargaining position in an eventual peace settlement with Israel. The war confirmed the limits of Arab military power and political will but at the same time indicated the potential of a negotiating strategy backed by the use of force and the manipulation of regional and international alliances. The pragmatic wing in the PLO leadership was quick to seize the opportunity to achieve more modest goals than the manifestly unrealizable "total liberation." The "national authority" program approved by the PNC in June 1974 represented implicit acceptance of a negotiated settlement that would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza and to recognition of Israel. Acknowledgement (in one form or another) of the PLO as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians by the Arab states, the Non-Aligned Movement, other third world groupings, and the Soviet bloc cemented the shift in strategy, as did the invitation to Arafat to address the UN General Assembly in November 1974.

The armed struggle had successfully reformed national identity and given substance to the PLO as the representative entity of the Palestinians. Consequently, its function changed. Military action became one of several instruments of policy serving a broader diplomatic strategy. On the one hand, suicide raids against Israel from the sea or across Arab borders and sabotage attacks by clandestine cells in the occupied territories were intended to

demonstrate PLO presence, “spoil” political initiatives that excluded the Palestinians (such as the shuttle diplomacy of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974–75), and persuade the United States and Israel of the need to bring the PLO into the peace process. On the other hand, the development of Palestinian forces in Lebanon was intended to protect the PLO’s statist entity from attack, reinforce its political credibility, and enhance its diplomatic strategy. The role of armed struggle was now to preserve the PLO’s status virtually as a state actor and to shield the internal processes of Palestinian state building, even if they took place in exile.

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Not everyone agreed with the PLO’s new strategy, which indeed contained contradictory elements. The Palestinian “rejectionists,” headed by the PFLP and backed by Iraq and Libya, adamantly opposed the PNC’s national authority program of 1974 and any process that would lead to recognition of Israel. While the DFLP had led the way to acceptance of the “phased” strategy, it opposed attempts by Fatah to build an axis with “reactionary” Egypt and Saudi Arabia and to start a dialogue with the United States. It argued, along with others in the pragmatic camp such as the Syrian-sponsored Sa’iqa and the Palestinian communists, that the PLO should only negotiate from a position of strength provided by a strategic alliance with “progressive” Arab states and the Soviet bloc.

Distrust of Arafat and Fatah reached new heights following the visit of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the launch of the talks that led to the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979. The result was the emergence of an unprecedented coalition of all the other Palestinian groups, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and, tacitly, the USSR. Each of the Arab states had its own reasons for disliking independent Palestinian diplomacy, especially if it entailed Egyptian and U.S. mediation and could lead to another separate deal with Israel. For its part, the Palestinian opposition entertained exaggerated notions of its own strength and of the cohesion of its regional and international alliances. It was strong enough to play spoiler within the PLO, but manifestly unable to offer a strategy that differed fundamentally from that of Fatah or to develop the armed struggle against Israel.

The irony was that the PLO also reached a historic high point in this period. Its position in Lebanon was secure, despite growing internal challenges, and its military buildup was at a peak. The political support it enjoyed in the occupied territories, coupled with the continuing armed activity of its clandestine cells, reinforced its claim to be the central Palestinian representative. The PLO demonstrated its military capability during confrontations with Israeli forces in south Lebanon in March 1978 and July 1981 and displayed its diplomatic potential by negotiating ceasefires through the UN and, indirectly, the United States. It developed working relations with several European countries in the late 1970s and won official recognition from the

European Community in June 1980 as an essential party in the peace process. The PLO had received sharply increased financial assistance from the Arab states since the Baghdad summit conference in November 1978. This, coupled with the extension of its political institutions into the occupied territories and the worldwide expansion of its diplomatic activity, effectively turned it from merely a state-within-the-state in Lebanon into a farflung state-in-exile.

Opportunities and constraints were balanced finely for the PLO at the beginning of the 1980s. It had reached the limit of its capacity to bring military pressure on Israel from its base in Lebanon or inside the occupied territories. Conversely, it was coming under increasing attack from Israel and the Lebanese right, while its former alliances with the Shi'i Amal militia, the Lebanese National Movement, and Syria were crumbling. The PLO's diplomatic strategy had also reached its limits. The limited armed struggle was insufficient to compel Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, yet the PLO was unwilling to accept the offer made in the Camp David Accords for a transitional period of Palestinian autonomy to be followed by negotiation of a permanent settlement with Israel. Arafat and his close colleagues still sought discreetly to join the U.S.-sponsored peace process, hoping to improve terms once they were accepted as partners, but the PLO state-within-a-state in Lebanon was too vulnerable to countermeasures by their suspicious allies for them to take this step. (In any case, the government of Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin would probably have refused to pursue the autonomy talks had the PLO come to the table.) The PLO was trapped between these contending aims. Still, it came close to achieving a breakthrough by 1982—so close, indeed, that the Israeli government launched the invasion of Lebanon in order to preempt negotiations that might eventually lead to Palestinian statehood.<sup>6</sup>

### DYSFUNCTIONAL SUCCESS

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut in summer 1982 effectively ended the Palestinian armed struggle and the process of state building. The Palestinian leadership continued to organize armed activity against Israel from its new places of exile, maintained its civilian institutions, and pursued its diplomatic strategy, but military action was no longer the main source of national identity or the main underlying dynamic of state building. The problem was that, without an autonomous territorial base, the PLO was reduced to little more than a structure for political management from afar, for which it was patently ill-suited. So long as there was a state-in-exile in Lebanon, the leadership had been able to divert energies into military and bureaucratic development and to coopt various constituencies either by creating new institutions or distributing patronage. The loss of this cushioning effect left it heavily dependent on the performance of administrative structures, paramilitary agencies, civilian branches, and affili-

ated social institutions that were not only dispersed geographically, but also fragmented, factionalized, and bureaucratized, if not frankly corrupted, by the spread of rentier politics and patronage.



**Palestine Liberation Army forces evacuate bases south of Beirut, 1982. (IPS Archive)**

To the extent that it was a problem of internal politics and organization, the structural predicament of the PLO was a direct result of the combination of populism, nationalism, and neopatrimonialism. These were enduring features of the Palestinian struggle partly because the principal guerrilla groups had at no time undertaken a serious attempt to transform their society and partly because of the domination, at first implicit and then explicit, of the state-building drive from the earliest stages. If any one man was the principal driving force behind this system, then it was indisputably Arafat. His ever-dominant tendency to distrust, and actively fragment, any organizational structure that could challenge his decisions or impede his policy directions intensified in the wake of the evacuation from Beirut. Many members of the Palestinian leadership and senior officials were already marginalized, having lost their power bases in Lebanon, and Arafat now sought to weaken remaining colleagues and potential rivals. He concentrated formal authority for a growing number of departments in his own hands, merging the military and finance sections of Fatah and the PLO and duplicating agencies that had not yet come under his control. Arafat fragmented organizational structures and channels still further, relying instead on increased distribution of patronage to maintain his personal control.

Notwithstanding these methods of control, Arafat still needed to bind the PLO apparatus and the wider Palestinian constituency to his diplomatic strat-

egy and to neutralize the Palestinian opposition that had been based in Damascus since the withdrawal from Beirut. It was in this context that he relentlessly waged the feud with Syria between 1983 and 1987, leaving his senior colleagues and the rank-and-file with little choice but to back "the independent Palestinian decision" and, in effect, to acquiesce in his concentration of power and diplomatic maneuvers. Arafat repeated this approach during the war of the camps in Lebanon, at times deliberately instigating clashes or escalating the conflict as a means both of discrediting his Palestinian opponents and of garnering international sympathy for the PLO. He reinforced this approach with the continuing flow of funds to political supporters, clandestine networks, media, and social institutions in the occupied territories to consolidate his local constituency.

The return of the main opposition groups to the PLO fold at the PNC unity session in April 1987 gave concrete evidence of Arafat's success in reconfirming his leadership over the Palestinian movement as a whole. He still lacked the means to exert pressure against Israel or to impose the PLO as a party to negotiations on terms acceptable to the Palestinians, however. The eruption of the intifada in the occupied territories in December 1987 provided unexpected salvation, as Arafat employed the uprising to rebuild the political fortunes of the PLO and secure the acceptance of his coalition partners for a two-state solution and recognition of Israel.

The intifada, more than anything else, revealed the shortcomings of the leadership of the PLO in general and of Arafat in particular. The ability of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza to persevere in the intifada after its spontaneous start was due to the extensive experience of clandestine activity acquired over the years and to the construction of mass organizations by Fatah, the PFLP, DFLP, the communists, and, latterly, the Islamists. Wazir was the person most responsible for this process within Fatah and arguably within the PLO as a whole, yet Arafat had devoted considerable effort during the 1980s to weakening him, reducing his budget, poaching his senior lieutenants, constructing parallel command committees, and excluding him from official PLO posts and delegations.

The assassination of Wazir by Israeli commandos in April 1988 left Arafat in sole control of Fatah and PLO relations with the occupied territories. Wazir had used patronage to secure the loyalty of specific social groups to the PLO but did so sparingly and usually directed funds toward established institutions, professional associations, or nongovernmental organizations. Arafat, conversely, distributed funds freely to individuals in all spheres and areas and encouraged the emergence of a large and uncoordinated network of beneficiaries who reported directly to him.

The relatively unified clandestine organization and the more centralized youth movements and semipublic associations that Wazir had painstakingly constructed in the shadow of the Israeli occupation rapidly fragmented into competing factions and cliques under the impact of Arafat's patronage. A similar proliferation of parallel institutions and redundant committees oc-

curred among Palestinian nongovernmental organizations engaged in community work or other social, economic, and educational activities in the occupied territories. The assassination in January 1991 of PLO and Fatah security chiefs Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) and Hayil 'Abd al-Hamid similarly left Arafat in sole control of their former agencies, which all but disintegrated.

Arafat may have proved himself to be a consummate politician, one able to construct a system of political control and to operate rent on a grand scale, but these patterns revealed his inability to build institutions of state. Whether upon assuming leadership of the PLO in 1969 or of the intifada in 1988, he had inherited structures created by others which he then fragmented and duplicated to an astonishing degree, reshaping their form and function to his purpose.

By the signing of the Oslo Accord between the PLO and Israel in 1993, Arafat's political control was so personalized that Palestinian politics had become almost wholly subservient to his sense of timing, temperament, and choice of priorities and methods. The consequences for the Palestinian national movement of his errors of judgment, such as the decision to escalate the Lebanese conflict in 1976 or to back Iraq during the 1990–91 Gulf War, were magnified as a result of this symbiosis between leader and cause. Conversely, Arafat's instinctive grasp of the direction of change in the Soviet Union and the international system led him to make the timely concessions in 1988 and 1991 that assured the PLO a continuing place in regional politics and a role in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Arafat succeeded, but he did so in a manner that exaggerated the material costs to his people at virtually every stage. His jealous grip on power prevented rational planning, minimized learning from experience, and impeded coordination of resources. The result was to reduce the political utility of sacrifices and strategic opportunities and ultimately to bring diminishing returns. The PLO under Arafat finally accepted limited autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza at a moment when fundamental changes in states and societies throughout the Middle East threatened to relegate the Palestine cause to the back of domestic, regional, and international concerns. The armed struggle probably could have achieved no more, at any time, than the Camp David offer of transitional autonomy made in 1978. It is unlikely that better organization and a different style of politics and leadership could have altered the outcome in any fundamental way, given the objective reality of divergent Arab priorities, Israeli power, Soviet diffidence, and U.S. hostility. The final gains, however modest, were purchased at tremendous cost to the Palestinians and their Arab hosts. Their eventual success in establishing an autonomous entity in the West Bank and Gaza was partly due to Arafat, and partly in spite of him. The armed struggle had taken the Palestinians this far, but the future of their attempt to build a sovereign state amidst severe external constraints would depend largely on their success in transforming their internal politics and organizational dynamics.



## NOTES

1. Quote from Augustus Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), pp. 34–35.

2. Ahmad Sayf, "Khalil al-Wazir Assesses the Various Phases of the Palestinian Struggle," *Shu'un Filastiniyya*, no. 152–53 (November–December 1985), p. 14 (in Arabic).

3. Donna Divine, "The Dialectics of Palestinian Politics," in *Palestinian Society and Politics*, eds. Joseph Migdal et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 214, 225.

4. The term *constant motion* was used by Khalil al-Wazir, cited in *Filastin al-Thawra*, 12 December 1993.

5. Fatah leader interviewed in *al-Ushbu' al-'Arabi*, 22 January 1968. Text in *Palestinian Arab Documents 1968* (Beirut: IPS, 1970), p. 27.

6. This assessment of Israeli thinking is presented in Avner Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security: Politics, Strategy, and the Israeli Experience in Lebanon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 89.