

# THE PLO AND THE PALESTINIAN ARMED STRUGGLE

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The emergence of a durable Palestinian nationalism was one of the more remarkable developments in the history of the modern Middle East in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was largely due to a generation of young activists who proved particularly adept at capturing the public imagination, and at seizing opportunities to develop autonomous political institutions and to promote their cause regionally and internationally. Their principal vehicle was the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), while armed struggle, both as practice and as doctrine, was their primary means of mobilizing their constituency and asserting a distinct national identity. By the end of the 1970s a majority of countries – starting with Arab countries, then extending through the Third World and the Soviet bloc and other socialist countries, and ending with a growing number of West European countries – had recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The United Nations General Assembly meanwhile confirmed the right of the stateless Palestinians to national self-determination, a position adopted subsequently by the European Union and eventually echoed, in the form of support for Palestinian statehood, by the United States and Israel from 2001 onwards.

None of this was a foregone conclusion, however. Britain had promised to establish a Jewish ‘national home’ in Palestine when it seized the country from the Ottoman Empire in 1917, without making a similar commitment to the indigenous Palestinian Arab inhabitants. In 1929 it offered them the opportunity to establish a self-governing agency and to participate in an elected assembly, but their community leaders refused the offer because it was conditional on accepting continued British rule and the establishment of the Jewish ‘national home’ in what they considered their own homeland. The Palestinians therefore lacked the experience of self-government and state-building by the time the British mandate came to a precipitate end in May 1948, and such political and military institutions as they had crumbled in the face of an offensive by Zionist forces with superior numbers, arms, training, and organization. In the course of the conflict that gave birth to the State of Israel, some 750,000 Palestinians, or 60-65 percent of the Arab population, fled or were expelled from their homes, to become permanent refugees in those parts of Palestine that had not been incorporated into Israel or in neighbouring Arab countries.

After 1948 the scattered Palestinian communities found themselves under diverse systems of administration, whether political, legal, or economic. Egypt placed the 300,000 Palestinians crowded into the tiny [Gaza Strip](#) under military administration, while Jordan annexed the West Bank and its 800,000 residents in an ‘act of union’ that was not recognized by any other country, but which ensured the gradual conferment of Jordanian citizenship on them. Some 100,000 Palestinian refugees

in Syria enjoyed all rights enjoyed by Syrian nationals except the right to run for public office and vote, whereas Lebanon denied a similar number all political rights and severely restricted their civil rights as well. In Israel itself the 150,000 Palestinians who had remained behind formed a small minority and were granted citizenship, but were kept under martial law until 1966 and suffered de facto second-class political and legal status afterwards. In all cases, the loss of land and other immovable assets, disruption of social and commercial networks and labour markets, and exclusion from political and administrative power pauperized and stigmatized most Palestinian refugees, leaving them heavily dependent on [UN-organized relief](#) and on onward migration and subject to economic and social marginality in host countries.

The searing experience of the exodus of 1948 provided a cradle for the growth of a shared Palestinian nationalism, but the aftermath of geographic dispersal and diversity in living conditions and host systems initially impeded it. Most refugees pinned their hopes for repatriation and restitution on Arab governments, especially on the immensely popular [Colonel Gamal Abdul-Nasser](#), who overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in July 1952 and promised to defeat Israel. In the following years, the Palestinian issue became a pawn in inter-Arab rivalries, often-cited but rarely pursued with vigour.

It was in this climate that the forerunners of the PLO took shape, small groups of political activists and self-styled “liberators” who sought the restoration of Arab Palestine, through war and the destruction of Israel. Most important of these were two: the [Movement of Arab Nationalists](#), which sought pan-Arab unity as a means of marshalling sufficient military and economic power to defeat Israel and confront its Western backers, and consequently adopted Nasser as its moral and political guide; and the [Palestinian National Liberation Movement \(best known by its reverse Arabic acronym Fatah\)](#), which resented what it saw as Arab ‘tutelage’ over the Palestine issue and planned to launch its own armed liberation struggle independently of the Arab states.

The charismatic appeal of Nasser on the one hand, and the surveillance of Palestinian political activity by host governments and security services on the other, dissuaded many Palestinians from joining the new groups or engaging in independent military activity until the mid-1960s. As Palestinians became increasingly restless in the face of evident Arab inaction, however, Nasser took the lead in endorsing the initiative of a Palestinian lawyer and diplomat, [Ahmad al-Shuqayri](#), to set up the PLO as a nationally-representative umbrella organization for the Palestinians in [May 1964](#). Nasser’s support ensured collective recognition by the Arab governments of the PLO, which was invited to join the League of Arab States and allowed to form a small “liberation army” with units based in the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip, Syria and Iraq. Jordan, which continued to press its claim of sovereignty over the West Bank and representation of its Palestinian population, grudgingly recognized the PLO but refused to host its army.

The [establishment of the PLO](#) posed a dilemma for the small, independent groups, which had yet to assert themselves in public or win a mass following. Fatah, which was ultimately to assert its brand of Palestinian nationalism and to dominate the PLO and Palestinian politics until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, felt the challenge most acutely in the mid-1960s. It regarded the PLO as a compliant tool of the Arab states, intended to contain growing Palestinian activism and dissipate demands for immediate military action against Israel. A fundamental tenet of its faith was that the Arab states had aborted Palestinian national aspirations by opposing the formation of a Palestinian provisional government in response to the UN Partition Plan of November 1947, in the dying days of the British mandate, and by preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state in the remaining areas of the country after the 1948 war. Fatah therefore determined to launch its armed struggle without further delay, as a means of regaining the initiative and setting the national agenda.

Fatah was far from ready for sustained military activity: it had few trained volunteers and even fewer serviceable arms, and its initial raids against targets in northern Israel were ineffective. For two years its fate hung in the balance. Nasser regarded it as a band of agents provocateurs sponsored by his rivals in the leftwing military faction of the Ba'ath Party that governed Syria, with the purpose of provoking Israel and dragging Egypt into a war for which it was not prepared. Warrants were issued for the arrest of Fatah members in Gaza and other Arab states; the Syrians themselves distrusted Fatah, suspecting it of links to Egypt and the outlawed Muslim Brothers, and arrested several of its leaders on more than one occasion. Yet the example of Fatah's pinprick guerrilla attacks on Israel was attracting a growing number of young Palestinians and prompting the creation of additional guerrilla groups, and even goaded the pro-Nasser Movement of Arab Nationalists into preparing its own military campaign.

As was to happen at several key junctures in modern Palestinian history, external events stepped in to transform the fortunes of Fatah, the other nascent guerrilla groups, and the PLO. On [5 June 1967](#), Israel launched a surprise attack on the armed forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, following Nasser's decision to withdraw a UN buffer force from the Sinai Peninsula and to blockade all shipping to or from the Israeli port of Eilat at the Straits of Tiran. Israel achieved a stunning victory over the next six days, in the course of which it seized Sinai, the Syrian Golan Heights, and the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip. While the Arab governments and armies reeled from the debacle, their political authority and military reputation shattered, Fatah announced the start of an insurrectionary campaign inside the newly-occupied territories. This proved to be a resounding failure from an operational point of view, but a success politically. Fatah had provided an example of defiance in the midst of defeat, which Arabs everywhere, but Palestinians most of all, desperately needed. The critical moment came on [21 March 1968](#), when an Israeli armoured column crossed the Jordan River

under heavy fire from the Jordanian Army, to destroy guerrilla bases in and around the Palestinian refugee camp of [Karameh](#). The Movement of Arab Nationalists (now renamed the [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – PFLP](#)) opted prudently to withdraw before battle, but Fatah decided to stay put. It lost two-thirds of its *fida'iyin* – ‘men of sacrifice’ – but reaped an enormous harvest as thousands of volunteers, inspired by its astute self-portrayal as the victor, flocked to guerrilla training camps.

The myth of the heroic guerrilla was born, and with it the mystique of armed struggle. Within months, the various guerrilla groups had taken collective control of the PLO’s ‘parliament-in-exile’, the Palestine National Council (PNC), with Fatah occupying the largest single bloc of seats. In [February 1969](#) the revamped PNC elected an Executive Committee wholly dominated by the guerrilla groups, and chose Fatah leader [Yasser Arafat](#) as its Chairman, a role he was to occupy until his death in November 2004. The guerrilla groups meanwhile expanded their military presence in the Jordan Valley and in the northern and southern border areas of Jordan, and established militia units and a range of recruiting, supply, administrative and public relations offices in the kingdom’s refugee camps and parts of the capital Amman and other cities. A similar process occurred in Syria, where the ruling Ba’th Party established its own guerrilla group, Vanguard of Popular Liberation War (best known as Sa’iqa -- Thunderbolt), and supported the establishment of guerrilla bases in south Lebanon. By 1969-1970, the guerrilla groups were launching 20-30 attacks a day against targets inside Israel and the territories it had occupied in June 1967.

These were halcyon days, but guerrilla power had already peaked. A growing proportion of attacks took the form of cross-border fire, as Israel reinforced border security and made infiltration ever more costly, and as it developed its intelligence capabilities and rolled up Palestinian secret networks in the occupied territories. Guerrilla cross-border incursions drew increasingly severe Israeli counter-fire and retaliatory air raids, which variously targeted the armed forces and economic infrastructure of the host Arab governments or their civilian populations. Israeli strategy was designed both to drive a wedge between the guerrillas and host populations, who were driven in growing numbers from border areas to seek refuge in main cities, and to coerce host governments into repressing the guerrillas. At the same time, indiscipline was rife among the many guerrilla groups and their members and supporters in the main cities. Bitter memories of political repression and imprisonment before the 1967 war, combined with a largely inchoate class resentment, fuelled open defiance of government authority even in the conduct of civil duties, demonstrations of armed strength, and, on the Palestinian left, public calls for social revolution and the overthrow of ‘reactionary’ Arab governments.

Nonetheless, the guerrillas remained widely popular throughout the Arab world and enjoyed the support of Nasser, who now viewed them as a useful ally in his war of attrition against Israeli forces

along the Suez Canal. The Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese governments therefore refrained from confronting the guerrillas directly, and instead concluded various protocols with the PLO regulating guerrilla activity, both military and civilian. The PLO proved unable to impose its will on the unruly guerrilla movement, however: some groups openly rejected its authority, and Fatah refused to instil discipline by force. Finally, after repeated skirmishes in 1969-1970, King Hussein sent the Jordanian army into Amman and the main cities and refugee camps in September 1970 to disarm the guerrillas and their civilian militias and reassert government control. ‘[Black September](#)’, as the PLO dubbed the showdown, demonstrated the unwillingness of its backers in Syria and Iraq to intervene in its defence. With the sudden [death of Nasser](#) of cardiac arrest and the replacement of leftwing allies in Syria and Iraq by more pragmatic leaders, the PLO was too weak to resist the Jordanian Army’s strategy of gradual encirclement, and by July 1971 it had been expelled from the kingdom. Although the documents within the present collection stop in 1970, it is useful to continue the narrative up to the present day. In Syria the new President Hafez Asad strictly curtailed guerrilla activity and PLO privileges, while similar attempts in Lebanon in 1973 and 1975 led to the breakdown of the state and army amidst a civil war that was to endure through successive phases until 1990.

The defeat in Jordan spelled the end of the Palestinian armed struggle as a practical strategy and as a mobilizing discourse, although the rhetoric and imagery were to survive for years. The loss of the principal PLO sanctuary was moreover compounded by the decisive defeat of underground resistance networks in the occupied territories. The dominant PLO group, Fatah, initially responded to the strategic predicament by resorting to international terrorism through a front group called the Black September Organization, whose most notorious action was the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in September 1972. This built on the precedent set by the PFLP, which had hijacked several Israeli and Western airliners between 1968 and 1970, and whose open flouting of Jordanian sovereignty provided the immediate pretext for King Hussein’s crackdown. By 1973 Fatah had called a halt to terrorism, and prevailed upon the PFLP to do the same, as it sought to develop international backing for its cause. In parallel, it exploited the vulnerability of the leftist guerrilla groups that had done so much to precipitate the September 1970 showdown in Jordan, in order to assert the PLO conclusively as the guerrilla movement’s governing body and higher authority.

The end of the armed struggle was most clearly embodied in a fundamental shift in PLO strategy and objectives from 1973 onwards. This followed the partial victory of the Egyptian and Syrian armies during the October 1973 war, and the deployment of the Arab ‘oil weapon’ in the form of an embargo on exports to the US and West European states. In the aftermath the PLO won unanimous recognition of its much-coveted status as sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinians from the Arab states (including a reluctant Jordan), the members of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Soviet bloc and other socialist countries. The quid pro quo was its willingness, albeit implicitly at first, to reach a

historic compromise with Israel through negotiations that would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. The new approach was articulated in a 'ten-point program' approved by the PNC in June 1974.

The PLO had not abandoned military means, but from now on its armed forces served more limited aims: protection of its new sanctuary in Lebanon (especially from attack by Maronite Christian militias and allied factions in the Lebanese Army in 1975-1976), projection of a state-like image, and maintenance of pressure on Israel. Its forces received conventional training and armament in this period, transforming them from guerrilla formations into regular brigades and battalions backed by heavy artillery and WWII-vintage tanks. These were of limited combat effectiveness, but served to reinforce PLO ties with Soviet bloc and socialist countries, which gave assistance, and with Third World countries that in turn received military assistance from the PLO. This network of ties translated into support at the UN, which the PLO had come to regard as a main arena of diplomatic action.

PLO transition to a primarily diplomatic strategy was by no means painless or bloodless. The PFLP led other, lesser militant groups in forming a 'rejectionist front' to counter what it saw as capitulation by the Fatah-dominated PLO and surrender of historic rights to the whole of Palestine. Syria, Iraq, and the USSR similarly suspected the PLO of seeking to join a US-sponsored peace process, and subjected it to sustained pressure; numerous PLO officials were assassinated by the Iraqi-sponsored 'Abu Nidal' group in the late 1970s. Reading the writing on the wall, Arafat demurred when invited by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to join the Camp David talks with Israel and seek Palestinian autonomy in 1977-1979. By then the rightwing nationalist Likud Party had come to power in Israel; not only was it committed to colonizing the entire 'Land of Israel' with Jews, but it concluded that the defeat of Palestinian nationalism in the occupied territories required destruction of the PLO base in Lebanon. It ordered the invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 and forced the evacuation of the PLO from its headquarters in the capital, Beirut, after a gruelling three-month siege that left 12,000-18,000 dead Palestinians and Lebanese, civilians in the great majority. The exile of the bulk of PLO military and civilian personnel to far-flung camps and offices around the Arab world demonstrated with finality the end of the military option. It also triggered a deep split within Fatah and a brief civil war between PLO forces loyal to Arafat and opponents allied with Syria.

The decade that followed witnessed political drift and bitter infighting, as loyalist and dissident PLO groups struggled for the allegiance of the Palestinian public. It also witnessed the 'camp wars', in which pro-Syrian Shi'a Muslim militias in Lebanon subjected Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and the south to a cruel siege in order to prevent a return of PLO power. Salvation came abruptly to the PLO when the occupied territories erupted in an initially spontaneous and unarmed popular revolt against Israeli control in December 1987. The PLO basked in its newfound limelight, and Arafat used

the fillip to obtain PNC approval of his formal condemnation of terrorism and recognition of Israel's right to exist, and so won an official dialogue with the US Administration, for the first time ever. This laid the basis for the PLO's eventual conduct of secret talks in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, with representatives of the Israeli government that came to power under the Labour Party in June 1992. The 'Oslo Accords' published in September 1993 offered mutual recognition between the PLO and Israel, and allowed the PLO to establish a governing Palestinian Authority in parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank from May 1994 onwards.

In retrospect, the armed struggle had allowed the founders of Fatah, the PFLP, and other guerrilla groups to achieve mass mobilization among the scattered Palestinians and to integrate them politically into the single, over-arching national framework of the PLO as a state-in-exile. It enabled them to carve out a measure of institutional autonomy in the Arab state system at an opportune moment in the late 1960s, and to preserve that niche thereafter despite suffering severe setbacks. Armed struggle moreover gave rise to a new political system, through which competing guerrilla groups and political factions could promote their agendas and acquire influence in accordance with commonly-understood 'rules of the game'. In the process, Fatah succeeded in asserting its brand of pragmatic, state-centred nationalism that emphasized the establishment of a political and institutional identity distinct from Arab counterparts, even if this meant accepting a territorial compromise with Israel that would leave the Palestinians with a mere 22 percent of mandate Palestine. Alternative nationalist discourses associated with pan-Arabism or the 'total' liberation of Palestine and unrelenting war with Israel were marginalized, although a new breed of Islamist groups – Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad – revived the discourse of 'armed resistance' from the mid-1980s onwards.

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