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Factionalism in the PLO

by Capt. Robert B. Adolph, Jr.

The common Western perception of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a monolithic group is false. The PLO is simply an amalgamation of many feuding groups with little in common except their "Palestinian heritage." This has been a historical fact since the PLO's birth in 1964. The PLO is sharply divided internally. It has not recovered after being forcefully expelled from Beirut in 1982 by the Israelis. Forced to flee from Lebanon, the PLO is still without a geographical base from which to conduct guerrilla operations into Israel. Without this base, the only means of keeping the struggle alive for some PLO factions is terrorism. At this time, the PLO is unable to mount a significant military threat toward Israel. This is true not only because of Israeli military superiority, but also because of Arab state-supported factionalism within the PLO itself. This factionalism is the result of demands some Arab states placed upon the PLO in exchange for their support. The PLO factions often act as a pawn of the interests of their various supporters. The Arab states that assisted in creating the PLO later intensified its factionalism.

There has never existed in the PLO the kind of unity of purpose and dedication to a singular ideology or political platform that would enable it to successfully prosecute the conflict with Israel. The objectives of the PLO have seldom been clearly articulated with a single consistent voice. This is something that the PLO's leader, Chairman Yasser Arafat, has been unable to do. The various factions are in conflict over the political future of the movement, disagree over what tactics are appropriate in dealing with Israel, and even disagree on how the "new Palestine" should look politically if the PLO ever succeeded in defeating the Israelis militarily. Obviously, the PLO cannot defeat Israel without the full support and participation of the confrontational Arab states.

Confusion over PLO objectives is a result of the various political platforms of the many factions and their dependent relationships with the Arab states. The factions represent Marxist, pan-Arab and Arab socialist ideologies. These differing viewpoints have manifested themselves in varying degrees of militancy and in the manner of prosecuting the continuing campaigns against Israel.

Leadership of such a body of substantially divergent political perspectives becomes a matter requiring great skill in diplomacy, compromise and the amelioration of internal tensions. This style of leadership works well within a stable, established state, but it does not provide effective leadership for a revolutionary and militant nationalist movement. For there to be any hope of a successful military or political outcome against such a powerful enemy as Israel, the leadership of the PLO must pursue a disciplined and unified course of action. No such discipline has ever been enforced within the PLO.

The sheer emotional impact of the conflict on the Palestinians cannot be ignored. The notion of some Palestinian factions as late as 1977 that they might ever be able to "drive the Zionists into the sea" is demonstrative of emotional and unrealistic thinking. Pragmatism should have forced nearly all PLO factions to realize that Israeli military superiority and the obvious limitations of the support of the Arab states had made such an outcome impossible.

A closer examination of some of the organization's factions and the dependency that exists between them and the Arab states proves useful.

Al Fatah

Al Fatah, led by Chairman Yasser Arafat, is the largest faction of the PLO. Al Fatah is essentially a nationalist movement with the liberation of Palestine as its main objective and has attracted mass support. It

has avoided strong ideological commitment and has succeeded in maneuvering between Arab governments.[1] Al Fatah has generally enjoyed the support of Syria and Egypt who helped in its creation. It receives financial support from Saudi Arabia and some of the Persian Gulf states.

Salah Khalaf, a leader in Al Fatah, said, "Our only demand is the establishment of a national authority on Palestinian territory."[2] His statement is simple and straightforward with no ideological window dressing. This is consistent with most of Al Fatah's public pronouncements. It is pragmatic in its ambiguity in that "Palestinian territory" need not mean the whole of Palestine but, rather, leaves the door open to potential negotiation with Israel. For the largest PLO faction, no ideology is the right ideology. Only the reclamation of some of Palestine is truly important. If Al Fatah had taken an ideological stand, it might well have alienated some of its supporters. Syria cooperated closely with Al Fatah. One thing the Syrians were reluctant to do, however, was allow commando raids from their territory. Thus, on several occasions Lebanese and Jordanian security forces intercepted guerrilla units coming from Syria to carry out operations across their borders.[3] Syria's support of Al Fatah in this case was hardly wholehearted. Egypt under Nasser was no more supportive. At the beginning of 1969, an American weekly published an interview with Nasser, in which the Egyptian president expressed a willingness to make concessions in return for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories.[4] Arafat immediately flew to Cairo and asked Nasser whether the views expressed in the interview were Nasser's or falsified. "Look brother," answered Nasser, "if I speak in the name of Egypt the state, then you embarrass me. But, if I represent Egypt the revolution, then I support you all the way."[5]

Reclaiming lost Egyptian territory was more important to Nasser than Al Fatah's nationalist aspirations. By "revolution" Nasser meant pan-Arab brotherhood. The interests of "state," on the other hand, demanded pragmatism.

Al Fatah was dependent on both Syria and Egypt for political and military support. That support was obviously conditional; its activities must not conflict with either Syrian or Egyptian interests. Because Al Fatah was dependent on both countries, there was little Arafat could do about the limitations imposed by the host-country governments. Existence without the support of Syria and Egypt would have been impossible. Conditions have not improved to date.

Saiqa

Saiqa, which means lightning bolt, is the faction within the PLO founded by Syrian authorities in 1968 as a commando force. Saiqa has often found itself at odds with other PLO factions to the point of armed violence. Its political platform reflects that of the Syrian Ba'ath Party which is generally socialist and pan-Arab. Saiqa in the past has not been adverse to publicly criticizing other Arab states nor of condemning rival PLO factions. Following the 1973 War, Zahir Mukhsan of Saiqa made the following comment, "The fundamental tactical goal at the present should be to prevent the Arab states from ending their state of belligerency in order that it may not obstruct the Palestinian people from persevering in the national cause."[6] Mukhsan's reference to the Arab states as an obstruction to Palestinian national goals reflects the deep enmity felt by not only Saiqa, but Syria as well. This example demonstrates the linkages between the Arab states and PLO factions. If Saiqa had owed its primary loyalty to the PLO, it is doubtful that it would have criticized the Arab states that had been even conditionally supportive of the organization as a whole. But Syria, in all probability, holds more sway over Saiqa than does the PLO executive committee or even Yasser Arafat.

At the time Saiqa was founded, Syria was locked in competition with Egypt for the leadership of the Arab world. According to Paul Jureidini, all of Saiqa's support came from Syria, and Saiqa's main function was to act as an instrument of Syrian policy. For example, Saiqa participated in the conflict in Jordan in 1970-71 as part of the Syrian force.[7] It may be that Saiqa should be considered a PLO faction in name only. Its interests are the interests of Syria and not the PLO.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

This faction, led by Dr. George Habash, is Marxist in its political platform. Its leftist bent has influenced the way in which the PFLP interprets the nature and goals of the Palestinian struggle, "The PFLP maintains that the liberation of Palestine through a protracted people's struggle must go hand in hand with a social revolution in the Arab countries."[8] It is easy to see why many Arab government leaders consider Habash and PFLP a threat. This platform of social revolution differs substantially from that of Al Fatah and Saiqa. In September 1974 the PFLP withdrew from the PLO Executive Committee and formed the "Rejection Front" that, aside from ideological differences, professed three distinctive points of policy: No negotiation with Israel, no peace with Israel and no recognition of Israel's right to exist. This hard-line stand created a major schism in the PLO that still exists today. The PFLP's autonomous stand in opposition to Al Fatah increased internal tensions and had the effect of hobbling the PLO as a whole. It is amazing that the PLO was able to exist at all in this light.

The PFLP was able to form the Rejection Front because of its support from Iraq, Libya and Algeria. None of these nations were involved with Israel in direct military confrontation. This simply meant that neither Israel nor the PLO threatened the security of these three countries. Habash made a tactical decision to forego the wider support he would have received by moderating his ideological stand. Ideological purity was more important to Habash than support from moderate Arab countries.

The Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DPFLP)

This faction, led by Nayef Hawatma, was formed by members of the PFLP who had become disenchanted with the Habash group. The DPFLP is considered to be politically the farthest left of the PLO factions and has adopted an extremely hard-line Marxist platform. The

DPFLP has found fault not only with the PFLP, but with Al Fatah as well, to the point of accusing Arafat of "selling out" his own people. In 1974, Hawatma made the following comment: "There are, however, others in the movement, such as the members of George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who think that the main problem is saying no to the Geneva talks. In this, they merely reveal their tactical nihilism. They betray the interests of our people who are fighting the occupation and Hashemite government alike. The nihilism of these others finds expression in the slogan: 'All or nothing.' This is not revolutionary policy, for it gives the Egyptians freedom to maneuver at our expense and, furthermore, also serves the imperialist policy."[9] Throughout this statement, Hawatma demonstrates contempt for the PFLP, Hashemite Jordan, Egypt and Habash. The enmity that should be directed at Israel is at least in part directed within the Palestinian nationalist movement and at Egypt. Such words reflect continuing divisions in the PLO. Although impossible to prove, the Soviet Union may provide the DPFLP some assistance because of its leftist policies.

The Arab Liberation Front (ALF)

The ALF, led by Abder-Rahim Ahmad, is closely associated with Iraq. When it was formed by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, the Iraqi government ordered Al Fatah offices in Baghdad closed. This was done so that the Iraqi controlled ALF would be the sole PLO representative in that country. Since then, the ALF has been a frequent target of Al Fatah. Al Fatah organized judicial tribunals which resulted in the execution of some ALF members.

The Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)

The PLF, led by Abul Abbas, is another faction which is closely tied to Iraq. Formed in 1977, the PLF is a member of the Rejection Front and is another offshoot of the PFLP.

The various factions of the PLO began to align themselves in generally one of two ways following the Yom Kippur War. The moderates demonstrated a willingness to consider negotiation with Israel over the future of Palestine. Egypt, albeit for different reasons, showed its resolve through the Camp David peace process. The radical factions aligned themselves with various Arab states in opposition to the moderates in the PLO.

The PLO lacks many of the essential elements of a successful liberation movement: cohesion, organization, discipline and unity of purpose. Fatah exerted great effort to unify the movement, but the various groups within and beyond the Palestinian community struggled to counteract this effort. The external support gave the radical factions near-complete freedom to act in accordance with their social revolutionary platforms while ignoring the wishes of Arafat and Al Fatah. This resulted in the deaths of as many as 4,000 Palestinians in Jordan, exacerbated internal PLO tensions, set back the PLO timetable for the liberation of Palestine, and cost the movement the support of King Hussein of Jordan. In addition, events in Jordan led to the Palestinian flight into Lebanon, one of several factors that precipitated the Lebanese crisis in 1975. Since its creation, the movement has suffered this internal conflict and has as yet been unable to find a solution.

The continuing conflicts within the PLO are a mirror reflection of the sharp divisions within the Arab world. According to Abu Iyad, second in command of the PLO, Arab governments do not want a Palestinian state. In a recent interview, he said: "If there were a Palestinian state, there would be no logical reason for Jordan to exist. As far as Syria is concerned, she wants a greater Syria. There are Palestinians who do not believe the PLO lives up to their dreams. These groups serve the interests of the states that support them. If there were a Palestinian state, I believe 90 percent of these terrorist acts would end."

The political and philosophical differences of the PLO's factions ensure continued disunity and discord. Aiding and abetting PLO internal problems is an Arab world which is in complete disarray. The PLO's expulsion from Lebanon in 1982 worsened the situation. Today the PLO's divisions are further aggravated by geographical dispersion. Unless the PLO can unite as one movement, a successful political solution with Israel cannot become a reality, and terrorism will remain the only acceptable means of expression for the more radical factions of the movement. ★

Footnotes

1. Susannah Tarbush, "The Divided Front," ***Middle East Economic Digest,*** Vol. 29, No. 39 (September 29, 1978), p. 6.
2. Ibid, p. 6.
3. Bard E. O'Neill, **Armed Struggle in Palestine** (Westview Press, 1978), p. 166.
4. Ehud Yaari, **Strike Terror** (Sabra Books, New York, 1970), p. 304.
5. Ibid.
6. "Palestinian Leaders Discuss the New Challenges for Resistance," Palestine Research Center (April 1974), p. 18.
7. Paul A. Jureidini, **The Palestinian Movement in Politics** (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1976), p. 27.
8. Tarbush, p. 8.
9. Michael Curtis, **The Palestinians**, American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East (New Jersey: Transaction Books), p. 17.
10. Stanley Bruce, "Fragmentation and National Liberation Movements: The PLO," ***Orbis*** (Winter 1979), Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 1048.

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