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## The PLO – A Declaration of Independence?

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Buffeted by events and conflicting pressures, the PLO is emerging from an intense debate over how to respond to the uprising in the West Bank and Gaza. The organization's history is replete with failures to adjust its strategy and goals in the face of defeats and changing realities. The recent debate within the PLO, however, caused by the Palestinian uprising in the Israeli-ruled West Bank and Gaza Strip, seems to suggest that things may be different this time.

The decisions made at the much-postponed 1988 Palestine National Council meeting might thus mark a turning point in the history of the PLO and the Arab-Israeli conflict, even a first step toward a breakthrough in the deadlocked peace process. Alternatively, they may be a step in a still-unresolved process requiring further changes in the PLO. Or they may be just another public

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Faced with pressure from the uprising leadership in the territories, by gains of rival Islamic and leftist groups and by Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank, Yasser Arafat is seeking approval for a Palestinian declaration of independence at the Algiers PNC meeting. But will the PLO actually achieve independence from the factors that have paralyzed it in the past?*

*In preparation for the PNC, the PLO has been engaged in an internal debate characterized by four lines of argument:*

- 1. A few PLO activists and some West Bankers are calling for a fundamental change involving recognition and negotiations with Israel.*
- 2. Elements in Fatah argue that something tangible must be achieved now, but not at the expense of unity. Tactics should be altered to extract maximum gain from the U.S., while retaining the long-term objective of destroying Israel.*
- 3. Others in Fatah, the PFLP and DFLP believe the PLO must protect its base of support by showing some movement toward ending the occupation. However, they maintain this only requires rhetorical adjustments aimed at shifting the blame for a lack of progress to others.*
- 4. Pro-Syrian groups and Islamic fundamentalists argue that open, violent armed struggle is the only path to redemption.*

*It appears that the third faction has prevailed and that the declaration of independence will be made in a way designed to suggest to the United States that the PLO has recognized Israel, to Palestinians in the territories that it is taking an initiative, and to the radicals and fundamentalists that it is doing neither.*

*In this case, the U.S. has no interest in relieving the pressure on the PLO. To accept the sparse progress made at the PNC as a maximum that can be expected would be a victory for the hard line forces which are holding back any further evolution.*

relations maneuver to produce the appearance – but not the reality – of PLO moderation.

How will we know the difference? The answer is straightforward: Unless the PNC can agree on clear recognition of Israel, an explicit acceptance of a compromise peace, and a message to the Palestinian people that the movement's goals must change, the battle within the PLO remains unresolved. The cause of this situation is that rejectionist factions and ideas still hold sway in the PLO, not because the United States has been unresponsive.

In this case, U.S. policy faces two problems. First, the PLO's ambiguous position on these key issues means that it has not yet done enough to merit U.S. recognition. Arafat and the PLO will move no further if Washington's diplomatic response relieves them of the need to transform their goals and policy. The PNC will not have met the minimal demands of mainstream doves in Israel, while disappointing Egypt, Jordan, and many Palestinians in the occupied territories who called for meaningful moderation.

The second problem is that the declaration of an independent Palestinian state would try to preordain an outcome which the U. S. government has long believed would contribute neither to regional stability nor to U.S. interests. The argument on which this U.S. position has been based—that an independent PLO-ruled state would threaten Jordan and Israel—remains valid.

#### **THE PLO's STRUCTURAL INTRACTABILITY**

During previous crises or diplomatic opportunities, PLO leader Yasser Arafat usually chose a policy of dynamic passivity.<sup>1</sup> He balanced the contradictory demands of Palestinian factions, Arab states, and extra-regional players by an inaction that he saw as his safest course. A statement implying moderation would quickly be matched by a restatement of an intransigent po-

sition; a step toward Jordan would be countered by a gesture to Syria. Above all, the PLO always refused to take any serious, irreversible step to recognize Israel, cease practicing terrorism, or negotiate with the Jewish state.

Two problems greatly limited Arafat's maneuvering room and made it rational and profitable for him to be reactive and ambivalent in his policies:

- **The Problem of Palestinian Disunity:** The Palestinian movement has been divided into factions with varying views, different state sponsors and conflicting leadership ambitions. Any step toward negotiations or compromise has historically risked antagonizing some of these groups and provoking a permanent split in the PLO. Arafat's desire to maintain his leadership and the movement's unity, alongside his own disinclination to accept Israel's continued existence, dictated least-common-denominator stances which made it impossible to achieve U.S. recognition, compromise with Israel, or progress toward material gains for the Palestinians. While recent developments show important evolution in the thinking of some PLO leaders, they also illustrate the continuing deadlock.

- **The Arab State Problem:** Arafat has been constrained by his need to maintain good relations with the maximum number of Arab regimes while preserving his organization's independence. Thus, Arafat further diluted his options by rejecting any action he feared might make him an Arab ruler's permanent enemy or client. Moving toward talks with Israel, for example, might make the PLO more dependent on Egypt and Jordan, while Syria and Libya might force another split in the organization or kill Arafat's supporters. Despite Damascus's attacks on the PLO, Arafat has done everything possible to heal the breach.

Arafat has thus pursued a policy of avoidance—a strategy in which there is much motion but little movement. On the one hand, he lacked

the strength or Arab support to destroy Israel; on the other hand, he lacked the willpower or consensus to make the compromises necessary to achieve a Palestinian state through negotiations. This paralyzed PLO proved unable to achieve recognition by the only two countries which could materially affect the fate of the Palestinians—the United States and Israel. And, over time, even the Arab states became tired of the issue. Thus, after 20 years of struggle and bloodshed, Arafat survived but achieved little beyond keeping his cause, leadership, and organization alive.

### **PRESSURE FOR A PLO REAPPRAISAL**

The Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which began in December 1987, caught the PLO by surprise. In fact, the PLO's traditional strategy had never been to mobilize the masses in the occupied territories out of disdain for their capabilities and fear that they might take over the movement. Now the inhabitants of the territories, however, have taken control of their own fate and, while still identifying with the PLO, have drastically increased their importance in Palestinian politics. The PLO's impotence contrasted sharply with the internal movement's new-found energy and power.

While PLO officials in Tunis or Baghdad could still indulge in sloganeering, indecisiveness, and oversized ambitions, Palestinians in the territories wanted action to end the Israeli occupation. These differences in perspective and priorities could lead to other conflicts and one of the main incentives for the PLO's maneuvers has been to avoid any such split.

Many of the uprising's slogans and leaflets called for Israel's destruction but the immediate demand was for a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. After a year of constant rebellion, however, the uprising has made no real progress toward ending Israeli occupation, achieving Palestinian self-rule, or

materially improving the lot of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, the *intifadah* has presented the PLO with certain advantages: it put the Palestinian issue back on the world agenda, won considerable international sympathy for the Palestinians, strengthened the PLO's hand vis-a-vis Jordan, gained the organization unprecedented support from Israeli Arabs, and polarized Israeli opinion on how to deal with the future of the territories.

Caught by surprise, Arafat followed his traditional policy of making demands without offering concessions or negotiations. Thus, the PLO used rhetoric and military means while, on the diplomatic front, it simply demanded Israel's withdrawal without providing any incentive for the United States (much less Israel) to agree:

- **Strategy by Rhetoric:** Arafat implied that the uprising itself would be able to expel the Israeli army by a sort of "peoples war." Other than calling for the continuation of the uprising—and urging its supporters to refrain from using guns—he had no strategic vision for transforming it into Palestinian political gains. This failure not only risked alienating Palestinians from their leadership, but could also demoralize and demobilize the *intifadah*.

- **Military Terrorism:** The PLO attempted to step up terrorist attacks on Israel, mainly across the northern border, but was militarily unsuccessful and seemed politically irrelevant. The PLO position in Lebanon was still weak compared to the pre-1982 situation. The April 1988 killing of Abu Jihad, probably by an Israeli commando squad, not only showed the incompetence of PLO security but also eliminated the PLO's chief military leader who also controlled its institutions in the territories.

The failure of these efforts coincided with a range of pressures on the PLO to take further action or risk losing its standing among Palestinians in the territories and among foreign supporters:

• **Pressure from an emerging leadership on the West Bank:** As it became clear that the uprising would not drive Israel out of the territories, Palestinian leaders there pressured the PLO to take political and diplomatic steps to end the occupation.<sup>2</sup> The PLO had long subordinated Palestinians in the territories, telling them to remain quiet and steadfast (“sumud”) while the PLO monopolized decision-making and political action. The uprising challenged this relationship. As Palestinians in the territories assumed a leading role, their views became central for the first time in the Palestinian power balance. One of Arafat’s aides, Khalid al-Hasan, commented, “I do not think that the leaders of the uprising will at any stage separate themselves from the leaders abroad.” And if the PLO’s efforts fail, he added, people in the territories would understand. But this kind of talk revealed more concern than confidence.

A document supported by one of the most prominent local PLO activists, Faisal al-Husseini, calling for a unilateral Palestinian declaration of independence, surfaced in August 1988. It advocated giving half the positions in a Palestinian government to residents of the territories, a symbol of that group’s new demand for equality. An editorial in *Al-Fajr*, Fatah’s newspaper on the West Bank, urged the PNC to arrive at decisions that were “clear, specific and straightforward. There is no room left for confusing rhetoric.” Call Number 27 of the uprising’s Unified National Leadership (dubbing itself “the PLO’s fighting arm in the occupied territory”), echoed this attitude, saying that the PNC’s outcome should make it possible for the PLO to attend an international peace conference “on an equal footing” with other parties.<sup>3</sup>

If the PLO proved unable to capitalize on the uprising to free them from Israeli control, local Palestinians might eventually decide that the PLO is useless. Their loyalty to the PLO, as the symbol of Palestinian nationalism, would still remain strong. But the mere existence of new leaders aware of their own strength and legiti-

macy could pose a serious threat to the PLO leadership in the future. This is precisely what al-Hasan and his colleagues fear and is a major factor pushing them toward changing the PLO’s strategy.

• **Gains by Rivals:** Others in the territories, however, demanded that the PLO take an even more militant stand. Arafat’s rivals – notably pro-Syrian groups, Islamic fundamentalists and the PFLP – took advantage of the uprising to increase their own base of support in the territories. Particularly important was the dramatic growth of Islamic fundamentalist groups – the Muslim Brotherhood’s Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even factions within al-Fatah – which have gained hegemony in the Gaza Strip and a base in the West Bank. These groups do not necessarily accept PLO or PNC decisions and demand that Arafat stick to a hard-line – i.e., no recognition, negotiations, or compromise with Israel. The ultra-radicals are engaged in a struggle with the more middle-class PLO supporters for the loyalty of the young people who furnish the uprising’s rock-throwing troops.

• **Soviet Urgings:** As part of his campaign to revitalize Soviet foreign policy and regional influence, Mikhail Gorbachev has encouraged the PLO to adopt more moderate positions, including recognition of Israel, to gain entry to an international peace conference with Soviet participation. Moscow also appears more open than ever before to a link between a Palestinian entity and Jordan. A number of Palestinian delegations were summoned to Moscow and were urged to take a meaningful initiative by the PLO’s most powerful patron.

• **Lack of Arab Support:** The intifadah was partly a response to the low priority that the Arab states gave the Palestinian issue, most notably at the 1987 Amman summit which put top priority on the Iran-Iraq war. Even after the uprising began, however, the PLO was not particularly successful in mobilizing support from Arab regimes. Little financial help was promised at

the 1988 Algiers Arab summit and less was actually delivered. According to Abu Iyad, "The [1978] Arab summit in Baghdad decided to grant \$150 million per year in aid to the PLO. And this decision remained purely on paper. Only Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar paid their shares—\$110 million per year. After 1983 Saudi Arabia was the only country to pay; the other Arab states stopped their payments." He also complained, two months after the 1988 Algiers summit, that the PLO had not yet received a penny of the funds promised there to help the *intifadah*.

During the uprising, there has been no unified or high-priority Arab political initiative. Egypt, the most active Arab state, remained at peace with Israel, urged PLO concessions to gain Western recognition, and favored Jordan-PLO cooperation. President Mubarak even called on the Palestinians in early 1988 to institute a moratorium on violence so that negotiations could proceed.<sup>5</sup>

• **Jordan's New Policy:** While the PLO competed with Jordan for control of the territories, it also benefitted from King Hussein's willingness to pay civil servants' salaries and to allow free access for people and goods from the West Bank. On July 31, 1988, however, Hussein announced that he was breaking links with the West Bank and stopping payments to most of the civil servants there.<sup>6</sup> While Hussein's action ostensibly fulfilled the PLO's dream of eliminating Jordanian influence, it also posed a serious problem for a leadership unprepared to make up for this financial shortfall.

As one PLO official described the organization's reaction, "At the time we felt we had to move fast, in case the Israelis decided to step in and fill the vacuum. But as time passed and the Israelis didn't move and the Americans didn't encourage them to move, we realized we had to take crucial decisions which required careful thought and thorough consultation." Arafat's spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif boldly stated,

"The Jordanian option...is over. Now there is the PLO, and only the PLO."<sup>7</sup> But where was the PLO and how would it respond to these challenges?

### THE PLO's DEBATE

Between June and October 1988, a lively debate took place within the PLO and among Palestinians. One of the first and most publicized of these statements was a position paper by Bassam Abu Sharif, Arafat's spokesman, distributed at the June 1988 Algiers Arab summit. "Israel's objectives are lasting peace and security," it stated. "The key to a Palestinian-Israeli settlement lies in talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The Palestinians would be deluding themselves if they thought that their problems with the Israelis can be solved in negotiations with non-Israelis." He proposed that a Palestinian state – with international security guarantees for Israel – be created as soon as possible.<sup>8</sup>

This statement, with its relatively forthcoming references to Israel, however, was not official PLO policy. Some West Bank Palestinians praised it, but Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), a leading figure in al-Fatah, and George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) strongly criticized it. Abu Iyad complained, "These articles and statements have done enough harm and have begun to form divisions on the Palestinian scene." Characteristically, Arafat defended neither the document nor its author.<sup>9</sup>

Splits within the PLO, and Arafat's fear of exacerbating them, seemed once again to paralyze the group. President Mubarak expressed both his frustration and the deadlock's causes: "The Palestinians cannot agree among themselves," he complained. "They trampled the Abu Sharif initiative ... Why do you not agree? Without agreement among the PLO's various factions, how will the process go on? It is not possible."<sup>10</sup>

But the cost of consensus would be a constant narrowing in the scope of the changes contemplated by the PLO leadership. In August, the PLO Executive Committee responded to King Hussein's decision to sever ties with the West Bank by calling for a PNC meeting within one month. The date, however, was pushed back repeatedly as individuals and factions battled over how to respond. As always, Arafat was reluctant to make decisive moves, particularly in the face of pressure from radical and Islamic fundamentalist groups which adamantly opposed establishing any Palestinian government, giving up the goal of conquering all of Palestine, or recognizing Israel.

The general line of approach suggested by activists in the territories was that the PLO should establish both a state and a provisional Palestinian government.<sup>11</sup> A delegation was sent to Europe to explore the likelihood of receiving recognition for a Palestinian government. Only Greece seemed willing to agree. The general view of these governments was that they could not recognize a state that was not in control of its claimed national territory. Several of them, including Britain and France, also took a stand similar to that held by the United States: they would not recognize the PLO until it first recognized Israel and abandoned terrorism.

The idea of a provisional government unleashed tremendous conflicts in the PLO: Who would be the cabinet ministers? How would the power be divided among rival Palestinian groups? What role would be reserved for those inside the territories? What would happen to the PLO itself once a separate government existed? The PFLP and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) adamantly opposed any such government – which they assumed Arafat's al-Fatah would dominate – and would not entrust it to negotiate with the American "imperialists." They made it clear they would block any initiative that included creating a government.<sup>12</sup>

While the idea of establishing a government

was thus rejected, the concept of issuing a declaration of independence for a Palestinian state achieved wide support among different factions. The juridical basis for this step was to be U.N. Resolution 181 of 1947 which also provided an ambiguous way of suggesting recognition of Israel. Back in 1947 that resolution, supported by the United States and the leaders of Israel, had called for creating a Jewish and an Arab state in Palestine with an economic union between them.<sup>13</sup> To prevent its implementation, the Arab states invaded Israel in 1948. The idea of bringing back this resolution some 41 years later posed a number of problems:

- **It suggested that the PLO was demanding large areas of pre-1967 Israel.** The constant demand of PLO leaders for "repatriation" of Palestinians who came from places within what became Israel in 1948 reinforced this conclusion. Although PLO leaders said the resolution was only being used to establish a basis for international legitimacy, even Egyptian President Husni Mubarak pointed out that these territorial implications might block diplomatic progress.

- **Not only had the Palestinians rejected the proposal in 1947** but Article 19 of the 1964 PLO Charter, amended in 1968 and still in force, states: "*The partition of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel are entirely illegal, regardless of the passage of time*, because they were contrary to the will of the Palestinian people and to their natural right in their homeland and inconsistent with...the right to self-determination."<sup>14</sup> Today, even the PLO's most moderate elements never speak of changing the Charter while the overwhelming majority, including Arafat's entourage, still seem to accept most of the Charter's ideology and its goal of eliminating Israel.

- **Previously, the PLO asked only for recognition of a right to self-determination** which, as suggested by its acceptance of the February 1985 accord with Jordan, could be fulfilled in ways

short of an independent state. The United States and Israel – or at least Shimon Peres and the Labor Party – accepted the idea of Palestinian self-rule in the context of a federation with Jordan. But now a declaration of independence would make recognition of a completely independent Palestinian state a precondition for negotiations.

• **The use of Resolution 181 seemed designed to avoid acceptance of Resolutions 242 and 338**, the key precondition for U.S. recognition of the PLO. Despite hints that he might break new ground – at his September speech to the European parliament in Strasbourg, for example – Arafat repeatedly refused to recognize Israel.<sup>15</sup>

By October, Abu Iyad, earlier one of Abu Sharif's harshest critics, supported the new scheme but his comments demonstrated the extreme ambiguity PLO leaders used in interpreting even Resolution 181. "We are not talking about borders set out in this resolution," he claimed. "We are only taking from it our legitimacy [because 181] is the sole resolution that the superpowers have agreed upon that gives us the right to establish a state ... Arab rejection [in 1947] was a mistake. We should not have to bear the mistakes of ancient leaderships. We have already suffered for 40 years because of those mistakes." He denied any intention of seeking the 1947 boundaries, "Because we are realistic, the 1967 borders are the subject of negotiation."

Yet Abu Iyad told another interviewer, "the West Bank and the Gaza Strip...are only part of the territory adjudged to us by Resolution 181" and added "the right to return" to all areas of pre-1948 Israel where Palestinians once lived "is an inalienable right" which "cannot be negotiated."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, as the debate progressed, it became increasingly doubtful that the PLO leadership had the determination, courage, or mandate for a bold and clear change in its program. While

the declaration of independence was an important step, the problem remains how to interpret and respond to it.

### A NEW PLO PROGRAM?

Even before calling a PNC meeting, Arafat had already made several concessions to radical elements, avoiding explicit recognition of Israel, naming boundaries for his proposed state, or setting up any kind of government for it. And his main "concession" to Israel seemed to be acceptance of a 41-year-old U.N. resolution. Caught between those demanding he do more and those wanting to limit any changes, Arafat was once again working for the lowest common denominator.

In the PLO debate, four lines of argument have emerged and will continue beyond the PNC meeting that characterize the internal struggle:

1) A few PLO leaders and some of the PLO activists in the West Bank favor a genuine attempt to negotiate an end to the conflict with Israel. They argue that Israel cannot be destroyed, that revolutionary and extremist rhetoric have brought little gain, and that the Palestinians must achieve something now to better their lives. They are prepared to seek a Palestinian state living peacefully alongside Israel. This would require a clear recognition of Israel and a defining of the proposed Palestinian state's borders and obligations. In other words, they are arguing for a **fundamental change** in the PLO's objectives.

2) For many elements in al-Fatah, Arafat's own group and the largest PLO faction, pressure from the *intifadah* and years of unsuccessful struggle appear to have persuaded them that the time had come to achieve something tangible for the Palestinians. But while they want to be recognized by the United States as a negotiating partner and to obtain a Palestinian state, they are willing to make only limited shifts to

receive these gains. Preserving unity and avoiding risks remains their priority. They also want to leave the door open to reneging on any commitments or using them as a springboard for the destruction of Israel in stages. Thus, they seek to avoid taking a clear position on recognizing Israel or abandoning terrorism, and refuse to define boundaries for a proposed state. At the same time, they talk more about a two-state solution, hint about recognition of Israel, and express interest in negotiations. They are still not yet ready to reach a compromise solution but are willing to take a hesitant, and still inadequate, step toward one. This line of approach constitutes an **alteration of tactics but not yet of objectives**.

3) Many of the same Fatah leaders who have been toying with Option 2 are also unsure in their own minds as to whether they wish to go even that far. Their main objective is to improve the PLO's standing in Western public opinion by making it appear flexible and moderate. Unwilling and unable to make substantive changes in its policy or goals, they seek a public relations gesture which will protect the PLO's base of support by showing it to be striving to end the occupation and forever eliminate any direct role for Jordan. In short, the change they have in mind would merely be a **rhetorical one**, aimed at dividing the PLO's enemies and putting the blame on them for a lack of progress.

4) Pro-Syrian and Islamic fundamentalist forces, who argue against major shifts and cry that the revolution is being sold out, would so water down the outcome as to block even any improvement in the PLO's image. They prefer that the PLO stick to its slogan of "Revolution Until Victory," urging an intensification of struggle to force Israel's withdrawal from the territories. They have contempt for the idea of waging a public relations war to win over the West and openly proclaim their desire to destroy Israel. These are the **true believers**.

While some PLO officials seem to genuinely

lean toward Option 1, they are the weakest of these four groups. The original intent of the main PLO leaders may have been to obtain something approximating Option 2, but the result was close to Option 3. The reasons for this include their own ambivalence plus the weight of Abu Iyad, the PFLP and DFLP (strong advocates of Option 3) and the super-radicals (supporters of Option 4). Those wanting a real shift, including some Palestinians in the occupied territories, still cannot change the PLO's basic positions. As so often happened before, the leaders were more concerned with persuading the even more militant factions (and their own consciences) that they were not retreating than with persuading the United States and Israel that the PLO was now ready to make peace on an acceptable basis.

Thus, the PNC is likely to declare an independent state to give a boost to people in the territories, while the accompanying political document while probably only hint at further steps if Washington were to accept an independent PLO-ruled Palestinian state as the preordained result of negotiations. But on issue after issue, the PLO still seems unwilling or unable to go anywhere near far enough to meet U.S. requirements for recognition and admission to negotiations.

The declaration of a state on the basis of U.N. Resolution 181 would not meet the minimal conditions for recognition of the PLO originally formulated by Henry Kissinger in 1975, accepted by each succeeding president, and passed into law by Congress. According to this formula, the PLO must accept U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338, agree to cease the use of terrorism, and recognize Israel's right to exist in order to qualify for U.S. recognition and admission to the negotiating table. Secretary of State George Shultz and George Bush have added a demand that the PLO change its Charter. These conditions were not arbitrary ones but represented the United States's considered judgment of the minimum requirements to demonstrate that the PLO had

genuinely changed its historic positions and to lay a basis for successful negotiations and a stable settlement.

The PNC's new stance, however, demands not only recognition of the PLO before any of these steps are taken but also a prior U.S. acceptance of an independent Palestinian state, a commitment which would run counter to all previous U.S. policies. In the past, the PLO demanded an acknowledgment of a Palestinian right to self-determination which, while in the PLO's interpretation inevitably implied an independent state, left a margin for other views (e.g., King Hussein suggested Palestinian self-determination in the context of a federation with Jordan). Thus, rather than make a U.S.-PLO rapprochement easier, the PNC's declaration of independence could make it more difficult.

The PLO handled the question of Resolutions 242 and 338 by only accepting them in the context of all other U.N. resolutions, an approach which so diluted them as to render any recognition of Israel meaningless. As for terrorism, under Egyptian pressure in 1986, the PLO said it would end terrorist operations outside of Israel. The PLO claims that any attacks within Israel, by definition, are not terrorist but are legitimate military operations even if conducted against civilians. Abu Sharif himself announced, "military operations that have been carried out against Israel, the Israeli army, will definitely continue as an act of resistance."<sup>17</sup>

Only a few days earlier, al-Fatah had claimed responsibility for a grenade attack in Haifa in which a small Israeli boy standing outside a toy store lost a leg. Abu Sharif also implausibly claimed that the murder of three Israeli workers on a bus by PLO terrorists was a military attack on a nuclear plant. Thus, while the PLO denies carrying out terrorism, its actions – and often even its statements – continue to contradict this assertion. Yasser Arafat, for example, says he supports "any operation against any Israeli occupying my country" and refers to the area within

Israel's pre-1967 borders as "occupied Palestine."<sup>18</sup>

The same ambiguity and playing with words can be seen on other PLO positions. This raises significant questions about the PLO's sincerity and constancy as, for example, in Arafat's definition of Israel within its pre-1967 borders as Palestine. And, not so long ago, he was attacking U.N. Resolution 181 in the most virulent terms: "We still remember this plot, which began with the partitioning of Palestine as a result of this ill-omened resolution adopted (unjustly and wrongly) by a majority of one vote."<sup>19</sup> On another occasion, Arafat claimed, "The Jews are part of our inhabitants," in reference to his concept of a Palestinian state.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the PLO refuses to revise its charter calling for Israel's destruction. "The covenant was drafted before this leadership of the PLO was elected," said Abu Sharif, and is thus of no contemporary importance. "The Palestinians resist occupation because they want their freedom, they want to establish their own independent state and not to destroy another people's state ... including Israel." But he also claimed, quite inaccurately that, "The PLO has never said it wanted to destroy Israel." On one level, Abu Sharif is correct in saying that the PLO has moved beyond the Covenant but the very fact that the organization is unable to revise the document shows how much its thinking continues to inspire and constrain the movement.<sup>21</sup>

Abu Iyad, one of the most hardline Fatah leaders, became a supporter of the new line apparently because he saw it as a mechanism for implementing the PLO's 1974 platform which advocated establishing a Palestinian state on any part of the occupied territories from which Israel could be ousted. Although some observers considered that program as a major shift, the PLO's actual interpretation of it over the ensuing 14 years was to reject any recognition of Israel while seeing the creation of such a West Bank/Gaza state as a first stage toward Israel's

ultimate destruction.

Abu Iyad confirmed this analysis. "The establishment of an independent state," he told an interviewer, was only a "short-term solution." The Charter defined "the natural borders of Palestine—north, south, east, and west." And when speaking of 181, "I did not say that the state would be on the basis of partition. I only spoke about the part that gave us legitimacy." In other words, even acceptance of U.N. Resolution 181 did not constitute the right of Israel to exist or acceptance of that existence. Creation of a state "will put the United States and Israel in a corner" and rally world opinion to the PLO. By such arguments, Abu Iyad signals Palestinians and other Arabs that this is, at least, a public relations ploy and, at most, an attempt to move forward on the 1974 program of destroying Israel in stages.<sup>22</sup>

Nabil Sha'ath, an Arafat adviser often cited as a moderate with whom the United States should deal, said, "we are using Resolution 181 merely as a basis for establishing a state. We are declaring political stands within the framework of an interim working plan for establishing a Palestinian state on a part...and not on all the national soil. Thus, the Charter still stands" and the PLO would try to achieve its entire program – i.e., the transformation of all "Palestine" (including present-day Israel) into a Palestinian Arab-ruled state.<sup>23</sup>

The question, of course, is whether such ambitions would merely remain a dream or would shape the policy of a future Palestinian Arab state. This latter possibility is strengthened by the fact that virtually every leaflet distributed during the uprising by all factions show a Palestinian state encompassing all of Israel in addition to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Much of the internal support for the new initiative seems based on a belief that it is primarily a propaganda action to win U.S. recognition in exchange for the most superficial changes in PLO policy. The United States is only acting rationally

ally in evincing a cautious skepticism and insistence that the PLO prove a change of goals. National security must be served by flexibility but cannot be based on wishful thinking.

The oldest of all political strategies, of course, is the attempt to get something for nothing and this is a large element in the PLO's current considerations. But there are also powerful forces pressing for some major change in direction. Abu Iyad argues for launching "a new initiative because, politically speaking, we have not made any progress for 14 years ... If we are to keep up our struggle, we cannot afford to mark time." Abu Iyad's pessimistic candor was remarkable by PLO standards: "We are not capable of war, and Arab regimes have practically decided since the [1982] Fez summit to stop war ... Under these circumstances, we need an initiative to prove to our people that we exist on the political map, so that there will be a goal for the continuation of revolution and struggle."<sup>24</sup>

Yet if the main purpose is to reassure the Palestinians and to close no options in continuing the battle, the result will not reassure the United States, much less Israel, that the PLO is ready for a serious and lasting compromise peace settlement. Indeed, the very same Abu Iyad, a few days after the above-cited statement, said that he could not recognize a right for Israel to hold "any part of the land of Palestine" and that the PLO's future "does not include any concessions."<sup>25</sup>

Is there equivalent pressure for the United States to abandon its long-held conditions for recognizing the PLO, particularly if the PLO does not make a decisive break with its own past? Surprisingly, Nabil Sha'ath, and perhaps other PLO leaders, seem to believe mistakenly that they have great leverage in attaining U.S. recognition in exchange for a very small price. The uprising, Iraq's victory in the Gulf War, and the international situation, he claimed, "have changed the balance in favor of the Palestinian cause." But where is the desperate need for the

United States to change its policy toward the PLO?

More accurate is the view of Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, who thinks that the PLO is the one which must change: "Any decision made by the PLO must be one that appeals not just to nonaligned countries but also to countries that can influence Israel, such as the United States and European countries. Otherwise, we will lose all European and U.S. support and Israel will get it."<sup>26</sup>

### U.S. CONSIDERATIONS: THE JORDANIAN AND ISRAELI RESPONSES

In principle, the PLO's objectives can be summarized as declaring the creation of a widely recognized Palestinian state in a context so that it can suggest to the United States that it has recognized Israel, tell its people in the territories that it is taking an initiative, and deny both of these things to the radicals and Islamic fundamentalists in its ranks. It can ask for recognition from the Americans, and gain recognition from many Third World and Soviet bloc countries, while making no commitments that cannot be withdrawn or later reinterpreted. Thus, the PLO is vague on whether its demand is for all of pre-1948 Palestine, the West Bank and Gaza strip, the frontiers proposed in the U.N.'s 1947 plan, or the acceptance of the West Bank/Gaza border as a transitional step toward achieving the first outcome. Instead, by declaring independence, the PLO seeks a new mechanism to bring additional international pressure on Israel to withdraw.

Among all the contradictory Palestinian statements, those about Jordan are particularly confusing. Sometimes PLO leaders speak boldly about the end of any Jordanian role, at other times they talk about a minimal and symbolic confederation between an independent Palestinian state and Jordan only after a Palestinian state is established. Although Hussein insisted that he would not change his mind about sever-

ing Jordan's ties with the West Bank, the geopolitical needs of Jordan and the survival of the Hashemite dynasty will force Amman to play a role in its future. Indeed, in October, King Hussein reasserted himself, appearing on American television to endorse Jordan's participation in an international peace conference and then hosting a meeting with Mubarak and Arafat.<sup>27</sup>

King Hussein's long-term strategy was best expressed in his November 22, 1984, speech to the Amman PNC. Jordan rescued the West Bank from Israeli occupation by annexing it in 1950, he said, and when Palestinians want Jordan to save them again, they need only ask his help. "If the future seems too dark...it is because...the special relationship binding Jordan with Palestine was eliminated from the Arab and Palestinian [scene]." He recommended that the Palestinians cooperate with Jordan. "However," he added, "if you believe that the PLO can proceed alone, we will tell you to go ahead."<sup>28</sup> The PLO's inability to deliver the West Bank/Gaza Palestinians from Israeli rule, Hussein was wagering, would eventually drive the local Palestinians and/or the PLO back to him. In 1988, he appeared to have renewed the bet.

At the same time, the fundamental conflict between PLO ambitions and Jordanian sovereignty is inescapable. Abu Iyad puts the issue in a way that can only chill Jordan's leadership. "We refuse to accept," he explains, that Palestinians who hold Jordanian passports – the majority of the population on the East Bank – should owe their principal loyalty to Jordan rather than Palestine. "We have no objection that Palestinians in Jordan continue to live as Jordanian citizens until the establishment of the Palestinian state."<sup>29</sup> This view may constitute a theory of stages for taking over Jordan, showing the danger that an independent PLO-ruled state on the West Bank would inevitably subvert Hussein's claim to the East Bank as well. Accordingly, U.S., Jordanian, and Israeli interests require that, to enter the diplomatic process, the

PLO would have to work out an arrangement with Jordan in which Amman's interests would be safeguarded and the result made more stable.

Israeli leaders have been split over how to react to possible changes in the PLO. Shimon Peres has sought creative ways to respond to any movement on the PLO's part and to encourage additional change, declaring, "We are ready to enter negotiations with Jordan and with authentic representatives of the Palestinian people who are men of peace and not men of violence."

Peres proposed holding elections in the territories, if violence there ceased, in which Palestinians could choose their own representatives (including PLO supporters) for talks with Israel alongside a Jordanian delegation. Former national security adviser Avraham Tamir, a Peres ally, suggested a strategy of altering the PLO's policies and methods to the point where it could become a negotiating partner, rather than trying to exclude it altogether.

Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud, however, claim the PLO is incapable of reform and reject it as an interlocutor even if its rhetoric changed. "The PLO does not want peace with Israel but to destroy it ... There is no use in holding peace negotiations with people who reject peace ... We know this from the Palestinian Charter and their ideology."<sup>30</sup>

In these circumstances, if the PLO wants to engage in serious negotiations it must convince Israel that it has abandoned goals held since the organization's creation and still present in its daily discourse. If the most the PLO will do is speak with grudging and highly ambiguous hints about recognizing Israel - with frequent references to plans to destroy that country in stages - it is not surprising that the Israeli leaders and public continue to be most suspicious about the PLO. If the PLO were to make a real change in its policies, however, there would be a strong positive response from Israel.

## U.S. OPTIONS

U.S. policy has several options toward a revised PLO position:

- **Make concessions to the PLO** in order to encourage it to move further;
- **Conclude that the PLO is incapable of sufficient change** ever to be an acceptable negotiating partner;
- **Stand firm on the minimum, quite reasonable, U.S. demands on the PLO** to force that organization to change further. If the PLO is unwilling or unable to do the minimum necessary - and in clear terms rather than in ambiguous language - the policy would be to encourage other local forces to step forward out of their frustration with Arafat's leadership.

Advocates of U.S. concessions will argue that the PLO has moved so little only to protect itself from more radical forces or due to its mistrust of the United States and Israel. Some will say that this new move is merely an opening bargaining position and that the PLO will mellow further in the course of exchanges or even after it has taken power.

Yet such views misunderstand the nature of the PLO and of Middle East politics. Abu Iyad may understand how badly the PLO has failed in the past but he has also said, "We would rather be frozen 10 more years than move toward treason" and has expressed regret that the PLO had no territory to offer the USSR for military bases.<sup>31</sup> Arafat finds it equally difficult to change the views he has held his whole lifetime and is always ready to take a more radical stance to match possible competitors. The problem is that the PLO has not yet changed. It has only just begun to recognize the need for change.

There are no new compelling reasons requiring quick U.S. concessions or tremendous risks. The third alternative for U.S. policy, main-

taining our current position, is clearly the best option. The PLO's position still poses too many basic problems for U.S. policy in terms of recognition and its demand for acceptance of a PLO state prior even to starting negotiations.

The PLO does not meet U.S. conditions for recognition since it is still unable to change its historic course to deal with a painful reality. The internal debate will, however, continue and the United States should help direct it in a moderate direction. The United States should welcome any progress which might occur. But overstating it would harden rather than moderate the PLO's stand and contribute toward freezing the PLO's reassessment at its current stage. It would allow some PLO leaders to continue thinking they can triumph without abandoning extremism, others to believe they need not resolve their own inner conflict about whether or not they are willing to make a real, lasting peace with Israel, and all factions to escape having to prepare their own people for moderation and compromise. As President Mubarak put it, the PLO's "responsibility is no longer restricted to adopting protesting or objecting stances. It must take the daring and positive steps which are required for the sake of the Palestinians' future."<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the recognition question, it is also still doubtful that an independent Palestinian state would be in U.S. interests because that entity would probably be a destabilizing force in the region, a threat to Jordan and Israel, and an ally of the USSR. Palestinian self-determination must be defined in a way which does not endanger the existing states and result in a whole new round of conflict, bloodshed, and instability. In short, even if the PLO were to meet U.S. conditions for recognition, this should not necessarily lead the U.S. to support a Palestinian state.

With Egypt, Jordan, local Palestinians, and even the USSR, pressing the PLO for more change, the United States should not settle for less. And with most of these forces – and signifi-

cant groups within the PLO – advocating a stronger link with Jordan, a U.S. policy of lowering the barriers to recognition or accepting an independent state as a prior condition for negotiations would in fact help the most radical Palestinian factions.

The United States has no interest in relieving the existing pressure on the PLO to moderate its position. To accept the sparse progress made at the PNC as the maximum that can be expected by Arafat would be to give a victory to the hard line forces which are holding back any further evolution.

"All parties must demonstrate their desire to make peace," said Secretary of State George Shultz, describing the consistent U.S. position. "For Palestinians, this means acting credibly and pursuing goals that are achievable ... All participants must renounce violence and terrorism. Each must agree to negotiate on the accepted international basis of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 ... Peace cannot be achieved through the creation of an independent Palestinian state or through permanent Israeli control or annexation of the West Bank and Gaza."<sup>33</sup> While the next president should energetically explore the chances for peace and the possibilities presented by the changing regional situation, this is still a wise policy. W

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*The views expressed in this research memorandum are those of the author and should not be taken as necessarily representing the opinions of the Board of Trustees of the Washington Institute.*

## ENDNOTES

1. These points are discussed in detail in Barry Rubin, "The PLO's Intractable Foreign Policy," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Papers Series Number Three, (Washington, DC: 1985). For a historical discussion about the relations between the Palestinian movement and the Arab states, see Barry Rubin, The Arab States and the Palestine Conflict, Syracuse University Press (Syracuse, NY: 1981). Western experts optimistically predicted a major shift in its orientation after such crises as the 1979 normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel, its 1982 defeat and evacuation from Lebanon, the 1983 Syrian-sponsored split, and its 1985 acceptance - then rejection - of a Palestinian-Jordanian federation. In each case, no important change in PLO strategy resulted.
2. See, for example, Paul Taylor, "West Bank, Gaza Palestinians Urge a PLO Political Initiative," *Reuters*, October 5, 1988.
3. Khalid al-Hasan, Interview in *Yediot Aharonot*, September 5, 1988, p. 17. Translation in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) September 7, 1988, p. 5. For the text of the al-Husseini document, see *Jerusalem Post*, August 12, 1988, p. 10 and FBIS, August 12, 1988, pp. 30-32. "A Critical PNC Session," *Al-Fajr*, August 14, 1988, p. 5. Text of Call No. 27 from *Al-Ra'y al-Amm*, October 10, 1988, p. 37. Translation in FBIS, October 12, 1988, pp. 6-7.
4. Robert Satloff, "Islam in the Palestinian Uprising," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus Number Seven (Washington, 1988); Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement of Palestine, August 18, 1988; Yahya Mamzah and Shawqi Mahmud, interview with Khalil Quqa, *Al-Anba*, October 8, 1988, pp. 24-25. Translation in FBIS, October 13, 1988, pp. 3-10.
5. Abu Iyad interview in *Der Spiegel*, August 29, 1988, pp. 131-136. Translation in FBIS, August 31, 1988, p. 6. Interview with Middle East News Agency, August 12, 1988 in FBIS, August 15, 1988, p. 4.
6. Text in *American-Arab Affairs*, Summer 1988, Number 25, pp. 194-98. The most interesting interpretation of the operational effect of Hussein's decision is given by Interior Minister Raja'i al-Dajani, *Al-Ra'y*, September 10, 1988, pp. 14-15. Translation in FBIS, September 14, 1988, pp. 27-32.
7. Jonathan Wright, "PLO Rethinking How to Use Uprising in West Bank and Gaza," *Reuters*, September 30, 1988; Bassam Abu Sharif interview in *Jerusalem Post*, September 16, 1988.
8. Manuscript, "Palestinian Document Circulated At Arab Summit in Algeria, PLO View: Prospects of a Palestinian-Israeli Settlement."
9. Ihsan Hijazi, "An Aide to Arafat Comes Under Fire," *New York Times*, June 22, 1988; Alex Efty, "Arafat Aide's Peace Proposal Stirs Palestinian Feud," *Washington Post*, June 23, 1988; Salah Khalaf statement, Radio Monte Carlo, Translation in FBIS, July 3, 1988, p. 5; Arab Liberation Groups on Abu Sharif Document, Radio Damascus, July 6, 1988, in FBIS, July 7, 1988; Nihad al-Jahez, "Independent Palestine Need Not Be Castrated," *Al-Fajr*, September 18, 1988.
10. Mubarak's comments are in his speech on the 36th anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. Text in FBIS, July 21, 1988, p. 11.
11. Interview with Middle East News Agency, September 27, 1988. Translation in FBIS September 28, 1988.
12. PFLP leader George Habash commented that he did not reject in principle a state or government, provided "such a government does not offer concessions in its programs or hide the PLO role...does not contradict the PLO Charter and rules, (and is one) that includes all the Palestinian revolutionary factions." See, Salam Musafir, "PFLP Official Views U.N. Role, Soviet Talks," *Al-Anba* (Kuwait), September 19, 1988, pp. 1, 30. Translation in FBIS, September 22, 1988, p. 25. DFLP leader Naif Hawatmeh said, "We reject this because it paves the way for establishing a government of the so-called moderates which will be accepted by the West and America's allies in the region." The last phrase seems a reference to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. See Gail Fitzer, "Israel Expects More than 50 States to Recognize Any PLO State," *Reuters*, October 11, 1988. Obviously, with such attitudes, the PFLP and DFLP would only endorse a new PLO position if they felt that it marked no change from previous PLO positions. The likelihood of their endorsement is inversely proportional to the prospect of U.S. support.
13. Text of resolution in Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, The Israel-Arab Reader (NY, 1985) pp. 113-122.
14. Y. Harkabi, The Palestinian Covenant and its Meaning (London, 1979) p. 76.
15. Though Abu Sharif claimed Arafat had endorsed the resolutions in his interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, op. cit. Text of the speech is in FBIS, September 15, 1988, pp. 3-8. Arafat would only drop private hints about a willingness to recognize Israel. See, for example, the report in *Le Monde*, September 21, 1988, p. 2.
16. Interview with Kuwait News Agency, September 23, 1988. Translation in FBIS, September 26, 1988, p. 6; Interview in *Der Spiegel*, op. cit., p. 5.

17. Ibid.

18. Interview with Voice of Lebanon, December 3, 1987. Translation in FBIS, December 4, 1987, pp. 3-6.

19. Ibid.; Algiers Voice of Palestine, November 28, 1987. Translation in FBIS, December 1, 1987, pp. 5-6.

20. *Al-Watan*, October 2, 1988.

21. Interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, op. cit., p. 4.

22. Kuwait News Agency, September 1, 1988. Translation in FBIS, September 2, 1988, p. 3; Interview in *al-Siyasah*, October 17, 1988, pp. 1, 20. Translation in FBIS, October 20, 1988, p. 5.

23. *Al-Majallah*, August 31-September 6, 1988, p. 11. Translation in FBIS September 2, 1988, p. 4. For a discussion of the strategy of stages, see Asher Susser, "Double Jeopardy: PLO Strategy Toward Israel and Jordan," Policy Paper Series Number Eight, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (Washington, 1987).

24. Interview in *Al-Anba* (Kuwait), September 7, 1988, p. 23. Translation in FBIS, September 9, 1988, p. 3.

25. Interview in *al-Siyasah*, October 17, 1988, op. cit.

26. On Mubarak's view, see text of his interview with *Al-Ra'y al-Amm* in FBIS, October 19, 1988, p. 12. See also Nimr Sirhan, "Yes, We Will Recognize Israel in Return for an Independent Palestinian State," *Al-Dustur* (Amman), September 26, 1988. Translation in FBIS, October 5, 1988, p. 33. Sirhan writes, "Under the present international balance of power and in the era of the uprising, the establishment of a Palestinian state is impossible without the recognition of Israel. I would also say that those demanding the liberation of Palestine from the river to the Mediterranean Sea do indeed represent our people's conscience and strategy" but the 1947 borders should now be accepted since that is all that is possible. Saladin "accepted a liberated part of Palestine and recognized a

crusader state on another part of Palestine, until a century later [it could be] wiped out."

27. Text in the *New York Times*, September 2, 1982. There were some hints from PLO sources, though totally unofficial ones, that the organization might be willing to establish a confederation with Jordan after establishing an independent state. This view was similar to ideas expressed by the PLO during the 1985-86 debate over the joint Jordan-PLO communique. Patrick Tyler, "PLO Official Discusses Revival of 'Jordan Option,'" *Washington Post*, October 16, 1988, p. A-33. King Hussein's appearance was on ABC's "Nightline," October 20, 1988. One problem seems to be that when PLO officials speak of the "Jordanian option," they speak of the return to the pre-1967 status quo while Peres, at least since 1985, has accepted the idea of a federation between the two Arab partners.

28. Text in FBIS, November 26, 1984, pp. A 13-18.

29. Interview in *Al-Anba*, op. cit.

30. The U.N. speech is quoted in FBIS, September 29, 1988, p. 37. For Tamir's remarks see the *New York Times*, September 2, 1988. Shamir interview with *Al-Ahram*, October 8, 1988, p. 5. Translation in FBIS, October 13, 1988, p. 34.

31. See *Al-Majallah*, March 10-16, 1984; *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, January 13-19, 1984; *Al-Jazirah*, November 4, 1983.

32. Interview with *al-Ahram*, text in FBIS October 20, 1988, p. 14.

33. George Shultz, speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 16, 1988, "The Administration's Approach to Middle East Peacemaking," U.S. Department of State Current Policy #1104, pp. 2-3. For a comprehensive set of proposals for the next Administration, see Walter Mondale, Lawrence Eagleburger et al., *Building for Peace: An American Strategy for the Middle East*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (Washington, 1988).

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