

Double Jeopardy:

PLO Strategy toward Israel and Jordan

Dec 1, 1987



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Executive Summary

Since the early 1970s, PLO strategy towards Israel has gradually evolved toward an increasingly sophisticated "strategy of phases" for the liberation of Palestine. Though directed primarily against Israel, this strategy has threatening implications for Jordan as well.

According to the PLO's "strategy of phases," it is essential for the PLO to gain influence, if not control, over both the East and West Banks of the Jordan River as a prerequisite for the ultimate liberation of Palestine. Jordan, on the other hand, perceives that any measure of PLO influence, let alone control, is a direct threat to its own existence.

The competition is essentially a struggle for control over both banks of the river, not just over the West Bank. Therefore, the room for genuine compromise between these two regional players is virtually non-existent.

Jordan has never supported a totally independent Palestinian state, which could very well turn against Jordan even before it turned against Israel. For the PLO, however, an independent Palestinian state is the sine qua non for the pursuit of its "strategy of phases."

A critical element in the "strategy of phases" is gaining international recognition of the Palestinian right of self-determination. For the PLO, self-determination is a means for the eventual dissolution of Israel, even within its pre-1967 borders. In this regard, PLO strategy accords the same right of self-determination to Israeli Arabs as it does to Palestinians in the territories and Palestinians inside Jordan.

Jordan's relations with the PLO have been characterized by a recurring cycle of containment and confrontation. However, despite their rivalry -- and indeed because of it -- the Arab-Israeli peace process established a basis for PLO-Jordanian coordination, even if only as another phase in the historical struggle between them. In effect, tactical coordination was designed by both sides as a means to co-opt, neutralize and subvert one another.

The two parties reached an abortive accord in February 1985 based on policies governed by totally divergent agendas and objectives. This disharmony was severely exacerbated by completely different perceptions of the urgent need for settling the conflict. Whereas the Jordanians firmly believe that time is against them, the PLO (mainstream and rejectionists alike) are convinced that despite Israel's current military supremacy, time is on the Arabs' side.

Since the suspension of their political coordination in 1986, Jordan-PLO relations have returned to "normal," that is, open confrontation, with Husayn seeking to undermine the PLO in the West Bank. Husayn has a hard uphill battle, but to dismiss Jordan as a factor in West Bank politics is premature. One may assume, however, that if Husayn were to make significant headway in the West Bank, Arafat would be the first to opt for a renewed "coordination" phase with Jordan. In all likelihood, this would result in yet another round of efforts to co-opt, neutralize and subvert one another.

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