

Developments within the Palestinian Opposition: Secular and Islamist Groups, the PLO, and 'National Dialogue'

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Brief Analysis

Yesterday, Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat met with Nayef Hawatmeh, leader of the Syria-based Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The meeting, which took place in Cairo, was the first between the estranged leaders in six years. Hawatmeh has been a waning force in Palestinian politics for nearly two decades, but the meeting is nevertheless significant because it represents the latest of Arafat's ongoing efforts to co-opt the Palestinian opposition and lay the groundwork for "final-status" talks with Israel.

Opposition Unity After the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was expelled from Lebanon in the early 1980s, Syria became the de facto home base for the secular Palestinian opposition. Since 1993, all of these groups, including the DFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the PFLP-General Command (PFLP-GC), Fatah Intifada, the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian Liberation Front, the Communist Revolutionary Party, and Saiqa, have united in their rejection of the Oslo agreements. Most of these groups, including the DFLP, remain formal, but inactive members of the PLO. Despite occasional efforts to form alternatives to the PLO, these groups have rarely proven more than an annoyance to Arafat. At the same time, however, these groups command considerable prestige in the Palestinian diaspora, a constituency that could be mobilized against a final status agreement that ends their dream of returning to Palestine. When U.S. president Bill Clinton made his historic visit to Gaza to witness the vote to annul the Palestinian National Charter in December 1998, leaders of the eight secular opposition groups named above banded together with Hamas and the Islamic Jihad to form the Palestinian National Conference, which convened simultaneously in Damascus. Several topics were discussed by the Conference, including alternative leadership structures to Arafat and the PLO. The Conference issued a communique insisting that the "Oslo-Wye River agreements do not represent the Palestinian national will." A "Follow-Up Committee" to the Palestinian National Conference reconvened in Damascus earlier this month. The Committee reconfirmed the decisions of the December 1998 meeting and rejected any dialogue with the PA, which it claimed had "lost its popularity and legitimacy."

Secularist Reconciliation In June 1999, Syrian vice-president Abdel-Halim Khaddam met with leading officials of PLO opposition groups based in Damascus and reportedly asked them to drop armed struggle. This apparent shift in

Syrian policy seemed to pave the way for reconciliation between Fatah and the Palestinian opposition. Indeed, a few weeks later, Arafat met in Cairo with Abu Ali Mustafa, a representative of George Habash's PFLP. Arafat's willingness to meet with a number two--and not with Habash himself--may be an indication of just how eager Arafat is to reach a rapprochement. A joint statement issued at the end of the meeting affirmed the need for "national dialogue," but also the need to adhere to the principle of "right of return" for Palestinian refugees. According to a report in Al Sharq al Awsat, during the meeting Arafat also agreed to increase the PFLP's monthly stipend from the Palestine National Fund.

Still, following the meeting, PFLP leaders were quick to explain that the event did not constitute an acceptance of Oslo or a recognition of the legitimacy of the PA. PFLP Political Bureau member Jamil Majdalawi was careful to differentiate between the PA--which he considered illegitimate--and Fatah, which "still has anti-Oslo Agreement elements." Despite the PFLP's efforts to distance itself from the PA, Fatah officials expressed optimism that other opposition groups would be swept up by the momentum and soon join the national dialogue.

Even before Arafat met Hawatmeh, it was apparent that Fatah's reconciliation with the largest of the PLO's secular opposition groups would exact a price. Both the PFLP and the DFLP have conditioned their return to active participation in the PLO on a number of concessions. The PFLP is said to have established its own set of "red lines" regarding Jerusalem, refugees, borders and settlements. Likewise, the Palestinian daily Al Hayat al Jadida reported that the DFLP was promised that no Palestinian red lines would be crossed without national consensus and that any final status agreement reached with the Israelis would be put to a "referendum." A joint statement issued following the Arafat-Hawatmeh meeting mentioned that the core issues would require a high degree of "national agreement."

Hamas Skeptical Arafat and his Fatah associates have of late also vigorously pursued a rapprochement with Hamas. In the most recent of these well-publicized attempts, in late July, Arafat dispatched former Hamas official (currently PA minister without portfolio) Talal Sidr to Amman to meet with Hamas politboro head Khalid Mish'al. Efforts appear to be ongoing. According to PA minister of planning and cooperation Nabil Sha'ath, further talks aimed at fostering reconciliation with Hamas would start this Thursday. Thus far, there has been little progress.

Rather than preparing to cooperate with the PA, however, Hamas appears to be moving toward a more militant stance. By early August, it seemed apparent that the military wing of Hamas was gearing up for a new round of attacks against Israeli targets. On August 6, during an interview with MBC Television, Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin pledged a return to armed struggle, and warned that "the next few days will prove that Hamas' military wing is still active." On August 15, a car bomb exploded prematurely in an unoccupied Hebron bomb factory. The very same day, two bombs exploded in Netanya. Two days later, on August 17, three bombs were discovered near a West Bank junction frequented by Israeli soldiers. Meanwhile, fears of imminent Hamas attacks were underscored by a report that appeared in the August 15 Sunday Telegraph claiming that Iran had transferred \$5 million to a Hamas bank account in Damascus.

Conclusion Arafat's attempted reconciliation with the Palestinian radical opposition--both secular and Islamist--is a gambit that will likely complicate the final status negotiations. By widening his coalition within the PLO to include the opposition's diaspora constituency, Arafat strengthens his base of support among Palestinians in the event that he is forced into a showdown with Hamas. Outnumbered and outflanked, Hamas may eventually be compelled to recognize the legitimacy of the PA. At the same time, if the secular opposition groups officially reintegrate into the PLO, they will have some input--if not the veto power they demand--over the final status agreements. Arafat could capitalize on the need to accommodate his PLO opposition as a means of leveraging his position in the final status negotiations with Israel. More pessimistically, the PLO opposition could prohibit Arafat from making requisite concessions, and cause him to indefinitely delay progress in the final status negotiations. If Arafat plays his cards right, a rejuvenated PLO could strengthen his hand in final negotiations. By co-opting the secular opposition, Arafat

has set the stage to undercut his anti-Oslo opponents, shore up his rationale for negotiating inflexibly, and limit the impact of criticism for the compromises he almost certainly will have to make to achieve an agreement with Israel.

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