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**THE PLO'S INTRACTABLE  
FOREIGN POLICY**

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## PREFACE

Since the Reagan Plan was launched in 1982, the United States has found itself engaged in an effort to bring King Hussein to the negotiating table by helping to transform the PLO into his moderate partner. This policy appears to have failed, not for want of effort -- as some argue -- but rather because of the apparent inability or unwillingness of the PLO to undertake this transformation.

Instead, behind the facade of its 1985 accord with Jordan, the PLO has continued its militant business as usual. Why, at a time of weakness, division, and defeat has the PLO been unwilling to modify its policies toward Israel?

To answer this question, the Washington Institute invited Dr Barry Rubin, Senior Fellow at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies and currently a Council on Foreign Relations Fellow working on the staff of Senator Gary Hart, to analyze the determinants of the PLO's "foreign policy."

What Rubin's study reveals is that the PLO's intransigence is not the product of some failure on the part of the United States or Israel to enter into a dialogue with the PLO. It is rather the logical consequence of Arafat's priorities which are dictated by the PLO's internal and inter-Arab politics. These factors make the PLO's intransigence an abiding reality and foredoom any peace process that depends on PLO acquiescence or cooperation.

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Barbi Weinberg  
President  
December 1985



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1985, the Middle East peace process came to depend upon the transformation of the PLO into a suitable partner for King Hussein in negotiations with Israel. Throughout the year, however, the PLO proved itself yet again both unwilling and incapable of playing that role. In victory or defeat, united or divided, the PLO's foreign policy remains intractable.

This abiding reality is a product of Arafat's priorities: the maintenance of independence from the Arab governments on whom the PLO depends for support; and the promotion of internal PLO unity. These priorities effectively paralyze him and his organization and prevent them from coming to terms with Israel.

**The PLO's interaction with the Arab states rules out any meaningful moderation:**

- \* Syria, by posing an alternative standard of militancy, by intimidating the Gulf Arabs, and by supporting PLO militants, is able to exercise an effective constraint.
- \* Jordan's King Hussein is at heart a competitor with the PLO for the allegiance of Palestinians in Jordan and the West Bank. Arafat will resist pressure from Hussein to moderate the PLO's position for fear of subordinating the PLO to Jordan in the process. And Arafat's resistance is reinforced by his ability to turn to other Arabs for support.

**Factionalism within the PLO also dictates militancy over moderation:**

- \* West Bank Palestinians are theoretically united behind Arafat but are split in practice and are unable to assist him in conflicts with Arab and factional rivals or exercise a moderating influence over the PLO's policy
- \* The pro-Syrian faction of the PLO split with Arafat but constrains him by holding up the emotionally appealing banner of rejectionism
- \* The "neutral" faction (PFLP and PDFLP) is pro-Soviet and rejectionist and works within the PLO to guarantee the revolutionary line
- \* The Fatah hardliners constitute Arafat's rump support and control Arafat by working with him

Since Arafat's legitimacy depends on maintaining or restoring PLO unity, he must adhere to this militant consensus. In this context, his alliance with Hussein is designed to exercise leverage over Syria and the United States and a veto over Jordan. It is not designed to promote peaceful coexistence with Israel.

**The PLO's innate tendency toward intransigence makes it a mistake to base the peace process on PLO moderation. Making concessions to the PLO only weakens Hussein's stand in his competition with Arafat. It is better for the U.S. to let the PLO fail in its frozen militancy.**



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## I. INTRODUCTION

1985 began as a year of great promise for the Arab-Israeli peace process. But a series of events from September to November appeared to throw the process off track, raising serious questions about the role of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as a suitable partner in that process.

First came the murder of three Israeli civilians in Cyprus by PLO terrorists. Israel's devastating air raid on PLO headquarters in Tunis followed. Then the Italian liner, Achille Lauro, was hijacked by terrorists from the Palestinian Liberation Front, led by Abu Abbas, a member of the PLO Executive Committee. An American was murdered by the terrorists. Subsequently, the British government cancelled a meeting with a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation which included two PLO leaders after one of them refused to sign a statement implying recognition of Israel. King Hussein, the PLO's partner in the peace process, then criticized the PLO for mishandling the affair. And the PLO Central Council, meeting in Baghdad in November, again failed to endorse UN Resolution 242.

Already many observers are concluding that these occurrences destroyed a promising effort. As analyzed in this paper, however, the real roadblocks had already been established by the PLO's intransigence. As a result, King Hussein had proven unable to:

--produce a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation acceptable to the United States

--provide some concrete evidence of PLO willingness to recognize Israel and cease the use of terrorism

--agree to direct negotiations with Israel by a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation

Thus, even before the crises of September and October, the PLO's inability to commit itself to serious negotiations had already stymied U.S., Jordanian and Israeli efforts to make progress.

All the classic aspects of the PLO's leadership and policy problems appeared in this recent crisis:

--Arafat continued the PLO's terrorist campaign to demonstrate his militancy and defend his leadership against internal challenges and Syrian criticism.

--While Jordan and Egypt defended Arafat and the PLO, significant frictions emerged showing the delicate balance on which Arafat's independence rested.

--Whether or not Arafat knew of Abu Abbas's operation in advance, he proved unable to criticize the action or discipline its organizers.

--PLO leader Abu Iyad, sitting next to Arafat at a Baghdad press conference, said that the PLO would not abandon Abbas and added, "the capitulationist is the one who merely talks and does not confront his enemy." Arafat needs the support of men like Abu Abbas to prove that he is not -- as Syria and others charge -- a 'capitulationist.'

--Arafat's charges that the United States was behind Israel's attack

on PLO headquarters and a more recent statement that dialogue with Washington is no longer possible seem designed to write off any PLO concessions in exchange for U.S. recognition.

--Khalid al-Hassan - another PLO leader - criticized the PLO delegate (Bishop Khuri) who agreed to sign the carefully negotiated statement in London implying recognition of Israel. He said the PLO leadership supported Mohammad Milhelm's refusal to sign -- the cause for British cancellation of the meeting.

These developments have once again demonstrated four abiding characteristics of the PLO: its inability to commit itself to negotiations; Arafat's difficulty in curbing internal factions; the PLO's problematic alliance relationships with Arab governments; and the continuing political appeal of hardline posturing for the organization.

Recent events thus reinforce this paper's central point: the tasks of maintaining the PLO's internal unity and its independence from Arab regimes come close to paralyzing Arafat. They have prevented -- and will continue to prevent - any decisive policy toward a realistic, negotiated political settlement.

## II. THE PLO'S GOVERNING PRINCIPLES

The moment of truth for the PLO seems to have passed. Within its grasp was a valuable partnership with Jordan, possible U.S. recognition, and the potential rule of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But the same political genie that promised Yassir Arafat these three wishes also threatened him with four curses: bloody retribution from Syria, the PLO's disintegration, Jordanian

domination, and the collapse of Arafat's leadership. These conflicting pressures produced a contradictory policy which emerged in stark relief during and after the hijacking of the Achille Lauro.

The conflict involved in the shaping of the PLO's political choices is usually ignored in formulating U.S. foreign policy. A careful consideration of Arafat's options and constraints, however, has much to teach us about the inability of the Chairman of the PLO to undertake a fundamental transformation of his organization and finally come to terms with Israel.

Arafat's relative success at preserving the PLO as an organization and himself as its leader has been based on two principles:

--Maintain the best possible relationship with the maximum number of Arab states without being controlled by any of them.

--Protect the PLO's unity even if that requires policies tailored to the hardest-line minority.

The 1983 split in the PLO and the organization's bitter conflict with Syria did not revoke these two principles; it only reinforced them. Arafat now has to be even more concerned to avoid further splits and to win back all possible defectors. He must devote equal energy to preventing either a Syrian takeover or dependence on other Arab states to save him from Damascus.

Arab politics have shown few examples of undying enmity. Today's hated usurpers are often tomorrow's allies. Thus Arafat, his allies, and volunteer Arab and Soviet mediators have devoted a great deal of energy to patching up the PLO-Syrian rift. The main PLO leaders have also concentrated on winning back Palestinian groups critical of Arafat's leadership. And after his recent setbacks, Arafat remains determined to return the PLO to

inter-Arab independence and internal unity.

Arafat's governing principles and strategy raise the question of whether the PLO will ever be capable of entering negotiations with Israel and making the compromises necessary for peace. At best, the constraints of PLO politics and policy make such a development far more difficult than usually considered; at worst, they make it impossible.

This is largely because Arafat has never developed a strategy for achieving the PLO's aim of liberating Palestine. A negotiated settlement with Israel has been ruled out by opposition from factions and Arab regimes as well as by the PLO's dominant ideology. However, the facile slogan of "Revolution Until Victory" has not been matched by the PLO's military efforts, usually involving terrorism against Israeli civilians. Accordingly, Arafat's leadership has been characterized by tactical drift, passivity, and reaction to outside pressures.

### III. ANALYZING THE PLO

The difficulty in understanding the PLO's behavior and policies lies in the organization's multiple political, terrorist, quasi-governmental, diplomatic and revolutionary identities. The issue is further complicated by the PLO's structure as a loose coalition of autonomous groups which repeatedly argue, split, seek different Arab patrons and even wage war on each other.

The complexities of intra-PLO and inter-Arab politics have placed severe limitations on Arafat's maneuverability. A moderate, negotiations-oriented path poses both internal and external dangers. The

Arab hope of eliminating Israel and ruling all mandatory Palestine, no matter how unrealistic it seems, has until now been the ideological faith and the political glue of the PLO's legitimacy among Moslems, Arabs and Palestinians. In trying to alter this pattern, Arafat would risk dependence on some Arab states (Jordan and Egypt) and unresolvable antagonism with others (Syria, Libya and South Yemen). Inside the PLO, he would provoke further splits by harder-line factions. Consequently, the PLO's intransigence has been neither a reaction to US and Israeli stubbornness nor a bargaining chip to gain a better deal, but a response to Arab political realities.

In theory, the PLO's setbacks in recent years seem to counsel a more moderate policy and one can argue persuasively that today provides the last historic chance for Palestinian self-rule. Yet PLO leaders have their own interpretation of these events. To most of them, the greatest danger is not that the Palestinian masses will desert or that Arab states will withdraw their support if the PLO does not bring concrete gains in the near future. They are more worried that their base will disintegrate if they do take diplomatic risks or even win "success" at the cost of accepting Israel's right to exist, giving away part of the patrimony or coming under any Arab ruler's domination.

There are fascinating parallels between the contemporary situation and past Palestinian mistakes. In 1939, Britain proposed a plan leading to an independent, Arab-ruled Palestinian state. Using arguments similar to those of King Hussein today, Egyptian officials urged Palestinian Arab leaders to accept the plan as the best possible deal: "One army is vacating some of its front trenches. Would you refrain from . . . occupying them?" They warned

that time was running out because the great powers would lose patience, Arab rulers would become preoccupied with other issues, and the Jews would grow stronger.<sup>1</sup>

Palestinian Arab leaders refused, replying, "when the revolution started, we had aims in view to attain. We cannot now tell our people, 'Stop the revolution because we got some high posts.'" Instead, they wrongly bet on Nazi Germany to overcome Britain. By 1948, Palestinian Arabs were in a weaker position but refused to consider partition. Mistrust between them and the Arab states, especially Jordan, greatly damaged inter-Arab cooperation and helped permit Israel's independence and military victory despite the odds favoring Palestinian Arab guerrillas and six invading Arab armies.

To a handful of Palestinian doves this history shows that compromise is better than self-destructive intransigence. But the PLO and Arab mainstream have blamed these defeats on Western perfidy, the disloyalty of moderates, and the treason of Arab leaders. These are the very dangers attributed to negotiations and compromise today.

Clearly there has been some political evolution in the PLO toward accepting a West Bank-Gaza state within a loose Jordan-Palestinian confederation in exchange for recognizing Israel. PLO statements continue to suggest, however, that this is merely a ploy to improve the PLO's image in the West and to gain a base for future operations against Israel. The PLO's refusal to alter its Charter calling for Israel's destruction and replacement by an Arab state can be cited in defense of this view, as can

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<sup>1</sup> On these historical developments see the author's The Arab States and the Palestinian Conflict (Syracuse, N.Y., 1981).

Arafat's continued support for terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians. Yet to focus on the statements instead of the political process which generates them is to ignore the heart of the problem: the limits on Arafat's political options if he wishes the PLO to survive. When forced to choose, his constraints are such that he feels himself pressured to adopt policies which maintain the PLO rather than policies which would enable him to make peace with Israel.

#### IV. THE PLO AND THE ARAB STATES

The PLO has survived on a complex diet of deep mistrust of and yet passionate alliance with the Arab states. It is dependent on them for money, political support and bases of operations. Conversely, the PLO's great Arab nationalist and Islamic legitimacy gives it leverage with these regimes. The Palestinian cause is the 'Holy Grail' of Arab politics, but the Grail has a will of its own in bestowing favors and playing regimes off against each other.

Nevertheless, Syria, Libya, Egypt, the Lebanese Shi'ites of Amal, Kuwait and even Jordan have demonstrated their desire to control the Palestinians and to decide what they really want, even while acknowledging the PLO as their sole, legitimate representative. And a decisive PLO commitment to any one party in the inter-Arab competition would sacrifice its freedom to the inevitable betrayal of state interests.

Since assuming leadership of the PLO, Arafat has won for it autonomy in the Arab system without losing Arab aid and support, only by avoiding conflicts with Arab states that would give them a pretext to revoke his



license as the Palestinians' leader. Arafat has walked a tightrope, balancing every favor with a tilt in the opposite direction. Ironically, he could preserve his independence by using it only on rare and essential occasions.

His term as PLO chairman is marked more by personal survival than organizational success. In the end, PLO involvement in the internal affairs of Jordan and Lebanon produced debacles. Today, the PLO -- its forces scattered and lacking a secure base near Israel -- is all the more vulnerable to Arab states' pressure and to the doctrinaire and divisive obsessions of exile politics.

Furthermore, all Arafat's efforts were unable to avoid the 1983 Syrian-sponsored split in PLO ranks and his second expulsion from Lebanon. Damascus falsely accused Arafat of softness toward the United States and Israel. But Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad's real objective in this maneuver was to control the Palestinian cause for his own benefit.

Although Arafat responded to the split by inching closer to Jordan and Egypt, he was careful not to burn his bridges back to Syria and Libya which he might some day need to escape Hussein's embrace. Given the Arab states' frequent shifts in alignment, such a reversal is easy to envision. Even after meeting with Qadhafi's bete noire, President Mubarak, Arafat was able to rebuild partly his links to Libya. Even after Syria's tough treatment, Arafat continues to devote a great deal of time and effort to making up with Assad.

Syria's continued refusal to reciprocate by negotiating with Arafat and its efforts to prevent Jordan or the PLO from negotiating with Israel are not merely ploys for regaining the Golan Heights. Damascus wants to

keep the Palestinians dependent, avoid any direct US role in brokering a solution, prevent Israel's acceptance in the region and ruin any possibility of Amman becoming the guardian of the Palestinians and the West Bank. A defeat on any of these four factors, Syria believes, would threaten its most vital interests. Thus Syria will always try to place limits on any PLO moderation by posing an alternative standard of militancy.

The fall-out from Arafat's December 1983 visit to Egypt shows the practical limits on his ability to counter the greater degree of militancy from both Syria and from within the ranks of the PLO. Five years earlier, after Sadat signed the Camp David accords, Egypt had been blackballed from Arab diplomatic intercourse. The PLO was one of the leaders of this boycott. But after Syria threw him out of Lebanon, Arafat briefly visited Egypt and met with Mubarak. Both the content and unilateral nature of Arafat's action stirred tremendous criticism in Palestinian ranks. Having spent a day in Egypt, Arafat had to spend months redressing the balance.

Pro-Syrian Palestinians called the trip evidence of Arafat's intended treason; Habash (leader of the PFLP) and Hawatmeh (leader of the DFLP) labelled it a grave mistake. Abu Iyad complained that Arafat had violated PLO rules and Palestine National Council (PNC) decisions. Even the loyal Abu Jihad had to approve the official censure of Arafat as having violated "the principle of collective leadership."

Syria's open break with Arafat also served to legitimize the military assault on Arafat's men in Lebanon by the Shiite forces of Amal. Amal's commander in the south, Mahmud Faqih, asked Arab states: "Why do you want us to cooperate with the PLO, while you yourselves act in contradiction

with that request."<sup>2</sup> Although Amal's attacks on Palestinian camps were criticized throughout the Arab world, another taboo had been broken.

Syria's militancy is not likely to be countered by PLO dependence on Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the other wealthy Arab oil-exporting states of the Persian Gulf. For while these regimes might think peace with Israel could contribute to regional stability, they are too frightened of internal upheaval, Islamic Iran's propaganda, and Syria's power to be of any help in that direction. Instead they have refused to support Camp David, have abandoned Egypt, and have threatened Jordan with an end to aid if Amman accepted the Reagan plan.

While they allow a PLO veto on matters regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf Arabs' overall foreign policy alignment with the United States, their refusal to intervene in Lebanon, and their preoccupation with Gulf issues are not designed for Arafat's convenience and their financial aid is far less than the PLO wants. They find it politically profitable to boycott any peace process and adhere to a militantly rhetorical line, allowing the most outspoken hardliners to dictate what is acceptable. But, by the same token, they will not go out on a limb for Arafat by dedicating their oil, military, or diplomatic assets to his struggles against Israel or Syria.

In July 1985, Kuwait National Assembly speaker Ahmad al-Sa'dun called for ending economic support to Jordan and the PLO now that they were "capitulating" by considering negotiations. The implication is that the PLO can only be the Palestinians' "sole legitimate representative" as long as it follows the traditional maximalist line, making it even more difficult

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Nahar, May 29, 1985.

and dangerous for Arafat to explore alternatives. The gap between the Arab states' rhetorical enthusiasm and their stingy support provokes Arafat's ire. "Honestly, the problems we face in our relations with some of our Arab brothers are much worse than those we face vis-a-vis Israel," he once complained.<sup>3</sup>

## V. THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JORDAN

Given Arafat's current circumstances, it is not surprising that he should now look to Jordan as the PLO's most important foreign policy link. It provides the only possible counter to Syria and therefore the only route to rebuilding the PLO's credibility and independence. But it would be a mistake to conclude that this uneasy alliance is based on a common desire for a negotiated settlement with Israel. For the PLO and Jordan are at heart competitors even though, in their current rhetoric, they style each other as beloved friends and devoted allies. Both know themselves engaged in ferocious competition for Palestinian loyalty (most Jordanians are Palestinians), control of the West Bank (ruled by Jordan between 1950 and 1967), and even survival. When the PLO ran roughshod over Jordan's sovereignty and tried to overthrow Hussein in September 1970, his army defeated and expelled them.

Jordan and Israel both oppose an independent PLO-ruled state. Israel wants to exclude the PLO altogether and negotiate with Jordan. The King, however, believes he must make an accommodation with the PLO to gain legitimacy and deprive the PLO of a veto before negotiating for the return

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Ra'i al-Am, April 27, 1985

of the occupied territories. At the same time, Hussein thinks he can outmaneuver and overcome Arafat both diplomatically and in the struggle for power in the West Bank.

Jordan wants to keep either Israel or the PLO from permanently controlling the territory. If Israel annexes the West Bank, Amman fears an upsurge in anti-regime sentiments among its own Palestinians, the expulsion of the local Arab population by Israel, or an Israeli campaign to make Jordan itself a Palestinian state as a substitute for the West Bank. These last two unlikely possibilities are taken most seriously in Amman, which has limited immigration by West Bank Arabs into Jordan.

Equally, despite its Arab nationalist rhetoric, Amman cannot be pleased by the prospect of a PLO-ruled neighbor. An Arafat regime might drag Jordan into war with Israel, ally with Syria against Amman, and would claim the loyalty of the Palestinian majority in Jordan. The Marxist factions would use every opportunity to subvert Hussein from untouchable new bases.

Today, despite its potential problems, Jordan is one of the Arab world's most stable states. Hussein has built a solid base of support among "East Bank" Jordanians, not least because they fear a Palestinian takeover. His reign has maintained peace and provided a degree of prosperity. He has coopted and controlled Islamic fundamentalists. There is no serious organized opposition. Yet Jordan will never be as strong as Israel or Syria. Its present tranquil state is dependent on avoiding a direct confrontation with either power. Too much support for the PLO could antagonize neighbors; too little might bring problems at home.

Therefore, Amman has tried to maintain its own West Bank foothold. In 1980, Hussein established a ministry for the occupied territories and, in

January 1984, he reconvened Jordan's Parliament, including West Bank delegates, for the first time in ten years. Jordan has subsidized West Bank civil servants and teachers, backed an East Jerusalem newspaper, and kept close ties with Nablus's political strongman, Aziz al-Masri. Indeed, after a recent visit to Amman, al-Masri applied to the Israeli military government to take over control of the Nablus municipality. The PLO views these actions with suspicion and even protests against them.

Meanwhile, Hussein restricted PLO activity in Jordan until mid-1985, blocking PLO attacks on Israel or organizing in the refugee camps, inhabited by 200,000 of the over 1 million Palestinians in Jordan. In early 1984, with US backing, pro-Amman West Bankers circulated a petition for federation with Jordan until stopped by PLO threats. Even after the February 1985 Jordan-PLO accord, Amman continued to impose limits on PLO activities in Jordan to protect its own position in the competition for Palestinian support. But majority public opinion in the West Bank, tempered by memories of Amman's pre-1967 rule and by the loyalty and fear inspired by the PLO, will not easily turn in Jordan's favor. Thus, King Hussein is in a difficult corner. He understands time is short. On the one hand, Israel is tightening its hold on the land. On the other hand, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres is willing to bargain and is supposed to turn power over in Autumn 1986 to his Likud partners who want to keep the West Bank. But despite his own sense of urgency, Hussein cannot and will not act without PLO support.

Both the PLO and Jordan know that their current detente may not last long. Arafat or Hussein could build a new alliance with Damascus; Hussein might be tempted to undermine PLO influence on negotiations in line with US and Israeli demands; or Hussein and Arafat will fall out over the division

of authority in the West Bank. In short, while Hussein and Arafat have their arms around each other's shoulders, each is on guard to ensure that his friend's fingers do not stray around his throat.

Hussein's answer to these practical problems is to throw the ball into Arafat's court, a strategy implemented in a brilliant speech to the November 1984 PNC meeting in Amman marking the start of his peace offensive that eventually led to the February 11, 1985 Jordan-PLO communique.

In the speech, Hussein spoke fondly of his grandfather, King Abdallah, who annexed the West Bank in 1950 and was murdered a year later by Palestinian nationalists. Abdallah, said Hussein, "sacrificed his life in his sincere effort to save the biggest part of Palestine," knowing the significance "of the historical phase through which our nation was passing."<sup>4</sup>

Hussein argues the current situation also requires the salvation of the West Bank under Jordanian sovereignty. The reference to Abdallah, however, reminds the PLO of Jordan's 17-year-rule on the West Bank and Amman's hope of dominating any future arrangement. In the same vein, he subtly portrays the PLO's rise as due to the "illusion that the restoration of the territory was around the corner." Jordan accepted the 1974 Arab declaration that the PLO was the "sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinians (to transfer) the political burden . . . from Jordan to the PLO." Consequently, the lack of progress has been the PLO's fault.

Confronting directly the PLO's rationale for intransigence, Hussein asked, "How long shall we heed those among us who say: Leave it for future

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<sup>4</sup> Speech of November 22, 1984 in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereafter FBIS), November 30, 1984, F-1.

generations . . . What makes them believe that the circumstances of future generations will be more conducive to achieving what they are avoiding to achieve? Can they stop time and progress for the enemy?"

Instead of useless posturing, the "natural starting point is to emphasize the special relationship between Jordan and Palestine" which is a "scientific fact." Slogans should not become chains, said the king. The Arabs must be flexible and moderate enough to win international support and even to produce a proposal acceptable to Israel "through a Jordanian-Palestinian formula which gives both sides certain commitments the world considers essential for achieving a just and balanced peaceful settlement."

Go ahead if you believe the PLO can proceed alone, he told the PNC delegates, go ahead, "the decision will be first and last yours." A few days later, Hussein told West Bank members of Jordan's parliament that the problem was not "natural rights" but "land in exchange for peace." In this context, UN Resolution 242 became a code word for willingness to recognize Israel. Ostensibly the PLO rejects its reference to the Palestinians as a refugee question rather than a national one, but the real problem is that it is not yet ready to take the decisive step prescribed by Hussein.

Essentially, Arafat and his closest supporters would like to awaken one morning as rulers of a Palestinian state. But politics do not work like pleasant dreams. The PLO must first cross the burning wasteland that lies between its present situation and its vision. Accommodation with the United States and with Israel, defying Syria, risking dependence on Egypt or Jordan, and braving an internal conflict that could produce a devastating Palestinian civil war are other matters entirely.



In short the recognition Hussein enjoys from the United States, Israel's preference for Jordan as a negotiating partner, and the King's greater military and economic power within a Jordanian-Palestinian federation do give him leverage over the PLO. Nevertheless, he cannot subdue the PLO because it has the alternative of turning to other Arab states for support. In their competition for Palestinian support then, Arafat is able to exercise veto power over Hussein's action.

## VI. THE PLO'S FACTIONS

Beyond these constraints imposed on the PLO's foreign policy by Arafat's efforts to maintain his organization's independence in inter-Arab politics, are the constraints which arise from the conflicts within the PLO's own factions. These also tend to dictate adherence to the comfortable path of continued militancy rather than taking the risks of making a commitment to recognize and negotiate seriously with Israel.

The Palestinian masses themselves have played only a limited, largely passive, role in shaping these internal PLO politics. Arafat may be popular among West Bank Palestinians even after all his defeats, but the PLO has conspicuously failed to mobilize this loyalty for political or military purposes. Resistance to the occupation has remained low, despite passionate rhetoric and scattered demonstrations, stone-throwing, and murders of Israeli civilians.

Minority support among West Bankers and Gazans for Jordan, the PFLP or DFLP, Communists, pro-Syria rejectionists, and Islamic fundamentalists challenges Arafat's hegemony. Alongside these political differences are the

traditional divisions among towns and clans. Arafat has contributed to these conflicts by blocking any independent role for mayors or local Palestinians lest they challenge the exile leadership. Therefore, while the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are theoretically united behind Arafat's leadership of the PLO, they are split in practice in a way that sabotages any influence they might have over Arafat's policies.

The relative irrelevance of the masses in PLO decision-making also hurts Arafat, whose popularity does not translate into much concrete help in his battles with Arab leaders and factional rivals. West Bankers who favor negotiations to save themselves from permanent Israeli rule have little impact on Arafat's strategy. His refusal to trust West Bank mayors or residents to represent PLO interests has made it difficult to put together a joint delegation with Jordan. Obviously, Arafat worries that Jordan, Israel and the United States might use local leaders as alternatives to the PLO.

Hussein hoped that two ex-mayors added to the PLO executive committee in 1984, Fahd Qawasmeh and Mohammed Milhem, might tilt the PLO in a more pro-Jordan direction. The Syrians murdered Qawasmeh in December 1984 precisely to sabotage such a development, intimidate pro-Arafat forces, and show that Hussein could not protect allies even in his own capital.

For all practical purposes, then, Arafat's constituency is al-Fatah's active membership, and not even all of them. Three other Palestinian groupings with perspectives and ambitions that conflict with those of Arafat compete with Fatah for influence over PLO decision-making. And all three strongly oppose any move toward serious negotiations with Israel or even a permanent alignment with Jordan.

The key to understanding the PLO's foreign policy, then, is that each of these more extreme factions has a mutually reinforcing gravitational pull on Arafat. Statements like those of Abu Iyad -- "Our steadfastness and adherence to our land is our only card. . . We would rather be frozen ten more years than move toward treason" -- are not mere rhetoric but reflect both sincere conviction and a pragmatic appreciation of Palestinian politics.<sup>5</sup>

The first of these factions is the pro-Syrian, comprising defectors from al-Fatah led by Abu Musa and Syrian and Libyan-backed groups. Syrian help allowed them to seize PLO assets in Syria and Lebanon but dependence on Damascus undermines their credibility. The rebels reject any retreat from the PLO's goal of destroying Israel and oppose detente with Egypt or Jordan, cooperation with the United States, or acceptance of Arafat's leadership.

Their ideology, however, is more popular than their small membership indicates. According to Abu Musa, "we are the conscience of Fatah who . . . express the broad faithful base." He criticizes Arafat's unilateral initiatives and sporadic attempts at authoritative leadership. Most of all, he expresses the emotional power of Palestinian rejectionism: "What should I say to my father" and others "who fought in order to recognize Israel?"<sup>6</sup>

Arafat knows many others can raise such difficult questions. A movement whose whole *raison d'être* was first to prevent the creation of and later to destroy Israel and which branded compromise as treason for 50 years cannot easily do a 180-degree reversal. Even a West Bank state would not deal with

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Majallah, March 10-16, 1984; Al-Watan al-Arabi, January 13-19, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Watan, May 26, 1983.

those whose ancestors' homes lay within Israel's boundaries or with a whole generation of activists raised on ideas of revolution and "The Return."

Abu Musa also makes another important psychological and tactical point: "in the stages of retreat, revolutionary movements adhere more closely to principles." The PLO's defeats have produced, in reaction, a tighter ideological rigor. Chased from so many geographical positions, the PLO is less able to abandon theoretical ones, especially since current weakness undermines its material bargaining power.

The second faction is made up of "neutrals" in the quarrel between Arafat and the rebels. The PFLP, DFLP, and Palestine Communist Party agree with Abu Musa on substantive issues: the danger of Arafat's treason, the lack of internal democracy, the importance of keeping traditional goals, and the need to challenge Arafat's leadership. But they disagree on two major tactical points: they attack the rebels' subservience to Syria and believe their objectives can be better pursued by working within the PLO. Having spent so long wooing these groups, Arafat is not eager to adopt a moderate line that would push them into Syria's arms.

These intermediate groups are also Marxists close to the Soviets whom Hawatmeh calls, "national allies in the struggle of our people and the Arab nation, while U.S. imperialism is (our) biggest mortal enemy."<sup>7</sup> They are not enamored of having Jordan as their partner or the United States as their mediator. Moscow, supporting this position, uses the faction as leverage to ensure that Arafat will not contradict Soviet interests.

While harshly criticizing Arafat -- Habash called his trip to Egypt a "blatant disregard of the national line. . . things have gone too far" --

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Khalij, October 6, 1982.

these groups argue that change must take place within the PLO's own institutions and, in the words of PFLP spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif, "we reject any attempt at changes by coup." If Arafat has gone too far, Abu Musa is equally at fault. Hawatmeh called the latter's rebellion "an attempt to dominate the whole of Fatah and . . . draw the whole PLO onto the path which is not its own." Hawatmeh favors compromise under the slogan, "the revolution's unity and cohesion with Syria."<sup>8</sup>

This program was designed to safeguard both PLO independence and rejectionism, as Abu Sharif put it, to "confront capitulatory strategies and American schemes (not as a) substitute to the PLO leadership (or as a parallel organization but) to maintain the revolutionary line of the PLO . . . The only way to counter (surrender schemes) is to restore the PLO's unity."<sup>9</sup>

Such a strategy requires cooperation with the third faction, Fatah hardliners led by Abu Iyad and Qaddumi who can be called the "so-far-loyal opposition." They condemn Abu Musa's split and the Marxists' wavering but their analysis has much in common with both groups. Abu Musa, Hawatmeh, and Habash never attack them. The rebels even reportedly asked Qaddumi to replace Arafat.

This group argues that the tactical extremists exaggerate the threat of moderation. They consider Arafat is safely under their control. Abu Iyad, for example, points to the Fatah Central Committee rejection of 1983 PLO-Jordan talks when Arafat, "without consulting his brothers (sought) a

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Khalij, December 19, 1983; Kuwait News Agency, December 15, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Jordan Times, April 17, 1984.

compromise plan outside Reagan's plan."<sup>10</sup>

Several outside efforts to moderate the PLO's stance have followed this pattern: Arafat solicits concessions, makes promises, and then is unable to deliver even Fatah, much less the PLO as a whole. Whether this is due to cynical manipulation or Arafat's limited control over the PLO, the result is the same. Abu Iyad concludes, "in political issues Arafat cannot act alone except (on) a press statement or interview. . . On fateful issues he cannot act alone at all." Abu Iyad assures everyone that the PLO leadership will have to continue its intransigent line.

While complaints against Arafat are justified, says Abu Iyad, "it is a sin (for) the good men in the movement (to) be infiltrated by foreign elements. . . It is better and more honorable" to stay in the PLO and correct Arafat's errors. This is the view of a large part of the forces still ostensibly loyal to Arafat. Thus to go along with Amman toward a real West Bank confederation or talks with Israel, would cost Arafat the cooperation of those mainstream Fatah people who think like Abu Iyad.

Abu Iyad also points out that the PLO cannot afford rapprochement with the United States but must continue to compete with Syria for Moscow's favor since, "we, the Palestinian revolution, regrettably do not have any territory to give the Soviet Union a foothold in the region."<sup>11</sup> But Abu Iyad will criticize Moscow if he feels it interferes in PLO internal affairs. When a Soviet delegation mourned fighting between the rebels and Arafat's forces in Lebanon as "fratricide," he replied that Abu Musa's men were not brothers but "criminals and renegades." He has a similar attitude toward

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Khalij, June 2, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Jazirah, November 4, 1983.

Syria--relations should be normalized only if it is not "at the expense of our independent national decisionmaking."<sup>12</sup>

While Arafat's importance as leader and symbol of the Palestinians is enormous, as even his rivals acknowledge, he is no longer above being publicly challenged. His legitimacy rests on an ability to maintain both consensus and militancy. When these two factors are called into question by the possibility that Arafat might change the PLO's political line, he has had to bow not merely to a few extremists but rather to the PLO mainstream that he supposedly controls.

"Moderate" has been an over-used word in describing the Arafat faction. Its leaders realize that they cannot destroy Israel militarily, but political necessity prevents them from abandoning that strategy. Similarly, they may understand that a West Bank-Gaza state linked to Jordan is the most they can attain, but that does not mean they are capable of setting a diplomatic course for that destination, since this would require a recognition of Israel, renunciation of their wider ambitions, and a possible loss of their reputations, leadership posts, and even their lives.

Further, Arafat's views should not be confused with those of a few intellectual PLO doves, useful as image-builders in the West but whom Arafat willingly abandoned to the hardline wolves. Said Hammami and Issam Sartawi paid for moderation with their lives. Sartawi saw that the PLO's least-common-denominator approach, allowing the most radical factions and states a veto, blocked any chance for progress. He hoped the PLO's defeat in Lebanon would open new options, but frustration and Arafat's disavowal

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<sup>12</sup> Voice of Palestine (Algiers), December 10, 1983; Kuwait News Agency, May 24, 1984.

led to his attempted resignation from the PNC shortly before his murder at the hands of Palestinian rejectionists.

More influential on Arafat's thinking have been the brothers Hani and Khalid al-Hassan. Both men have advocated alignment with Jordan. Hani warned that "if no Jordanian-Palestinian understanding is reached, then Jordan will go it alone." Jordan is "our main geographical option" for a "bloc capable of confronting the Israeli enemy. But Amman's patronage is no substitute for Palestinian sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> If Syria is Scylla, Jordan is Charybdis.

These reservations were reflected in the PLO's responses to King Hussein at the 1984 PNC meeting. In presenting the political report, Farouk Qaddumi said there was no difference between the Peres and Begin governments in Israel, a country he referred to as "the part of Palestine occupied in 1948." In a step backward, the PNC restricted Palestinian contacts to anti-Zionist Israelis. Habash and Hawatmeh would be given no excuse to accuse Arafat of excessive moderation. Three PLO executive committee seats were reserved in hopes of enticing the Marxists back. "National unity," said Qaddumi, "continues to be the Palestinian revolution's main preoccupation."<sup>14</sup>

At the PNC, Arafat said he favored a "distinct Jordanian-Palestinian relationship" but one based on an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. He granted that the lack of inter-Arab cooperation harmed his cause and that objective circumstances were unfavorable. Yet his

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<sup>13</sup> Al Sharq al-Awsat, December 3, 1983; Al Watan al-Arabi, January 13-19, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Text in FBIS, November 28, 1984, pp. A-4 to A-14.



answer to these problems, as always, was to invoke the virtue of steadfastness. Ruling out any major policy shift, Arafat quoted an appropriate passage from the Koran: "True to their covenant with God . . . some still wait: But they have never changed their determination in the least."<sup>15</sup>

## VII. THE FEBRUARY 11 COMMUNIQUE

It is in this context that the February 11, 1985 Jordan-PLO accord should be understood. It arose from King Hussein's diplomatic offensive to force the PLO into a partnership, preferably a junior partnership, with him.<sup>16</sup> In this delicate, difficult game, Hussein sought a mandate from Arafat for a joint delegation to negotiate on creating a Jordan-Palestine confederation. Arafat, on the other hand, sought support against Syria and hoped he could use Jordanian influence to gain U.S. recognition and even territory.

Accordingly, the respective political stands of Amman and the PLO, the composition of the delegation, the identity of its interlocutors, and the nature of the confederation to be created were all vague and contradictory. On the one hand, Hussein was trying to play down the very real conflicts between the two partners' views. On the other hand, he put the best, most moderate, interpretation on the PLO's stand to gain American involvement and pressure on Israel. Hussein presented the PLO as flexible so that U.S.

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<sup>15</sup> Speech of November 22, 1984 in FBIS, November 26, 1984, pp. A-8 to A-12.

<sup>16</sup> The most authoritative text of the february 11communique is in FBIS, February 25, 1985, pp. F-1.

concessions and leverage would, in turn, force and encourage the PLO to be more flexible.

His handling of the issue also reflected Hussein's learning from his abortive negotiations with Arafat in 1983. In February 1985 Jordan and the PLO had agreed on general, but still unratified, terms. This time, however, in contrast to 1983, Amman announced the agreement before Arafat submitted it to his executive committee, which thus had no chance to reject or drastically modify the agreement.

The PLO was thrown into confusion by Amman's clever timing. The PLO's need for Jordan's help made it difficult to disavow the accord altogether, but the PLO tried to interpret it in the narrowest manner -- an effort spurred by the criticism aimed at the agreement by the USSR and the near-hysterical denunciations of Habash and Hawatmeh.

The PLO executive committee accordingly gutted the accord by:

- Rejecting UN resolution 242. The accord, and Hussein's statements to the Americans, implied the PLO accepted it.
- Demanding an independent Palestinian state with a loose confederation to come later. The accord called simply for a confederation and Hussein had implied that he would have the real power.
- Insisting on a Jordan-PLO delegation rather than a Jordanian-Palestinian one, contradicting Hussein's statements that non-PLO Palestinians would compose a delegation acceptable to the United States and Israel.
- Refusing to recognize Israel. The accord's "peace for land" phrase was portrayed by Hussein as constituting recognition.

Furthermore, the PLO's definitions were on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Said Qaddumi, "if Jordan sees any contradiction in its view of the draft formula with our understanding and point of view, then it is better to call a halt." Added Abu Iyad, "we reply to the slogan, 'Land for Peace' by saying 'The Palestinian land and Palestinian national rights for peace.'" Hani al-Hassan explained, "frankly and clearly, I say that we reject Resolution 242. We rejected it in the past and will reject it in the future."<sup>17</sup>

Such a stance was all very well in principle but it totally negated Jordan's effort for a creative new approach. "We do not understand . . . the expectation," commented the dovish Jordan Times, "that some solution could be found when there is nothing but inaction on our side."<sup>18</sup> The PLO position was a formula for continued deadlock and revolutionary posturing, but we have seen that internal and inter-Arab politics may make such posturing more politically valuable than alternatives.

It is clear what Hussein wants from the February 11 accord. At a minimum, even if the effort collapses, he can improve his relations with the United States and blame the failure on Israel and the PLO. If West Bankers become desperate enough, they may one day accept a unilateral Jordanian approach to save them, as happened in 1950. At best, Hussein can regain the West Bank and take his chances of subordinating the PLO to his rule.

Arafat's interest in the initiative is explained by the PLO leaders themselves. Writing in Al-Ahram, Arafat admitted that the PLO's 20 years of

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<sup>17</sup> Washington Post, February 27, 1985; FBIS, February 4, 1985, p. A-1; FBS, February 15, 1985, p. A-2

<sup>18</sup> Jordan Times, February 7, 1985.

struggle had not brought victory. He attributed this failure to the Arab regimes, calling for an end to the Iran-Iraq war, stronger Arab unity, Egypt's return to the Arab fold (if it abandoned Camp David), more military pressure on Israel, and the rectification of PLO relations with Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Most important, however, were two necessities: First, "All the Arab countries must recognize the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the Palestinian revolution." Second, "the PLO's political moves are aimed at creating an international atmosphere conducive to the recognition of our inalienable national rights, primarily the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to establish an independent state."

In short, Arafat wants to gain recognition, even support from Europe and the United States without real concessions or losing the backing of Arab governments. Both in his own self-interest, and to avoid antagonizing the regimes, he will not step beyond the Fez Arab summit call for an independent Palestinian state and he will not recognize Israel.

There is no room here for delegating authority to anyone -- even the PLO's own nominees. Abu Jihad affirms, "Nobody (will) negotiate on our behalf (or) share our representation. . . There is no compromise on this whatsoever."<sup>20</sup> How can Arafat expect the West or Arabs to see his group as sole legitimate representative if he does not insist on this prerogative? How can he accept Jordan's intervention, while rejecting Syria's, especially since many of his colleagues prefer Damascus over Amman?

An additional element is that Arafat does not desperately need a

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<sup>19</sup> Al Ahram, February 21, 1985 in FBIS, February 26, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> FBIS, February 26, 1985, p. A-2.

settlement, as many Western observers believe, even though he does find useful an at least temporary alignment with Jordan. Pushing for a settlement, will bring less -- not more -- support from the Arab states. Even if Arafat does nothing, he is convinced, the PLO and the Palestinians will not disappear as a people or as an issue. But if he does take a serious move toward peace, they will be in danger on both counts.

Similarly, the PLO's refusal to recognize Israel -- or even make clear what conditions might produce such a step -- is not a question of tactics but one of principle. Nominally, the PLO rejects UN Resolution 242 because it refers to a Palestinian refugee problem rather than a national problem. But focus on this specific detail allows Arafat to avoid dealing with the issue of recognizing Israel. The PLO has shown little interest in proposals to rectify the wording in Resolution 242 as was, for example, suggested by the Carter Administration and Egypt in 1977.

In speaking of UN resolutions, explains Hani al-Hassan, the February 11 agreement "means including 150 of them" and was designed to avoid endorsing 242. "In the PLO view, peace means the establishment of a democratic state on all the Palestinian territory in which everybody, both Arabs and Jews, will live free of religious or racial discrimination." This revives the idea of a "secular democratic state," codeword for destroying Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Another aspect of Arafat's strategy is support for an international conference, including the USSR and Arab states, instead of face-to-face talks with Israel. Such an arrangement would water down U.S., Israeli, and Jordanian leverage, allowing Arafat to escape their pressure. Instead, the

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Sharq al-Awsat, March 1 in FBIS, March 5, 1985, p. A-2.

PLO would again be aligned with Moscow and Damascus. Even if the process collapsed, Arafat would be in a far stronger position, his militant credentials untarnished and his diplomatic legitimacy enhanced.

Even if Arafat's personal position is more flexible than the above analysis implies, Palestinian and Arab threats and warnings in the aftermath of February 11 reinforced his usual determination to have his militant cake and eat it, too:

--The Fatah Central Committee rejected U.S. proposals for structuring a meeting with a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

--Abu Iyad called for rescinding the accord if Syria and the Marxists were willing to make up with the PLO.

--In April, a boatload of terrorists travelling from Algeria to attack Israel was sunk by the Israeli navy. The massacre of Israeli civilians that the terrorists sought would have destroyed any chance for negotiations, as those who ordered the attack must have known. The organizer was not Habash, Hawatmeh or even Abu Iyad, but Arafat's closest lieutenant, Abu Jihad.

--Syrian-backed Amal attacks on Arafat's remaining men in Lebanon and Kuwait's talk of cutting off aid were signs of the retribution that might follow any real PLO peace effort.

--Arafat won only a small majority in the PLO executive committee for choosing delegates to meet with the United States and all this "victory" brought was a list consisting almost completely of PLO officials. When Israel accepted the only two men not in that category, the PLO then declared that they were never intended as

delegates but only as consultants. The PLO rejected its own nominees when Israel accepted them!

American hopes that the PLO would choose such genuine moderates as Gaza Mayor Rashid al-Shawwa or Bethlehem Mayor Elias Freij were naive. Arafat did not have confidence even in pro-PLO mayors who were not under his direct discipline. Abu Iyad commented, "Mr. Peres's attitude [in accepting the two non-PLO delegates] is logical. All the Israelis want is to establish a distinction between the external and internal Palestinians. . .whereas we form a single people."<sup>22</sup> This is a remarkably insecure view: If the Palestinian people support Arafat and the PLO, then how could they be so easily divided?

The events of September and October, 1985 when public attention was focussed on the PLO's involvement in terrorism and a meeting between the British Foreign Secretary and a Jordanian PLO delegation fell through, showed the wide political gap that still existed. The clearest expression of PLO strategy is made by Khalid al-Hassan. First, the February 11 accord and efforts to meet with the United States were intended only as a public relations gesture, "a kind of storming operation to counter the negative aspects of Western policy in the struggle between us and Western governments regarding public opinion. . .I believe that positive results have been attained in Europe, and some results are starting to appear in the United States." <sup>23</sup>

Second, the agreement was made out of PLO weakness vis-a-vis Jordan. This inequality, Khalid al-Hassan argued, can be accepted only as long as

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<sup>22</sup> Le Monde, July 26, 1985.

<sup>23</sup> FBIS, July 1, 1985, p. A-4.

absolutely necessary but it can serve a useful purpose in rebuilding PLO organization in the West Bank, ending past Jordanian restrictions, and providing a safe haven and ally against Syria. "The agreement with Jordan," he says, "is aimed at preserving the PLO, its existence, legitimacy, and . . . institutions, as well as the continuation of the Palestinian issue." Chased out of Lebanon, the PLO sees an alignment with Jordan as the only way "to be directly on the borders" of Palestine.

Abu Iyad is equally blunt: "I still have reservations because I have no confidence that the Americans are serious about solving the Middle East issue and the Palestine cause. I know that this agreement is basically aimed at marketing the PLO, as some Jordanians and Palestinians say, to the Americans."<sup>24</sup>

#### VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The impact of internal and inter-Arab politics on the PLO's foreign policy presents a number of important lessons for the formulation of U.S. policy.

First and foremost, U.S. decision-makers should continue to reject the simplistic, though endlessly repeated formula that claims:

--The Arab-Israeli conflict is eternally the central -- one would almost think the only -- issue in the Middle East.

--Arab states make their decisions on relations with the United States primarily in terms of this question.

--Unless a quick solution is found to the problem, the Middle East

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<sup>24</sup> FBIS, July 25, 1985, p. A-2.



will explode. Pro-U.S. regimes will be overthrown or will decide, out of anger or a sense of self-preservation, to turn to the Soviets. U.S. interests will be destroyed; U.S. influence will disappear.

Events for over three decades and current trends show these ideas to be mistaken. Equally erroneous is the conception that the Arab states all support the PLO and that Palestinians all support Arafat's leadership. This view is accurate inasmuch as the PLO and Palestinians will not be destroyed, that Arab regimes cannot easily circumvent the PLO in making peace, and that Arafat enjoys broad popular support among Palestinians. But the more important point is that the Arab regimes will calibrate their support for the PLO depending on the policy it follows and the dangers activism poses for them. Most Arab leaders judge that the political risks of actively seeking peace equal those of going to war. The same principles apply to Arafat's decisions. Put simply, there may be Arab support for the PLO in general but that support would quickly evaporate were the PLO to promise a sincere strategy of peace.

There are a number of other myths that must be questioned:

--"The United States could bring peace if it merely tried harder."

Certainly, Washington is the most promising mediator for the dispute but given the PLO's innate tendency toward intransigence and the exercising of a veto over Jordanian efforts, U.S. initiatives face great difficulties. At the same time, an American president should only risk his prestige and fully employ his political, diplomatic and military capital when he perceives a reasonable chance of success for any initiative.

--"Pressing the peace process forward is the best way of reducing terrorism." Since most terrorism nowadays is carried out by those passionately opposed to any negotiated settlement -- Libya, Syria, Iran, local Islamic fundamentalists, the marxist left -- one can better argue that progress toward diplomatic success will increase the incidence of terrorism. Syria's terrorist offensive against Jordan is a prime example of this point. The PLO has also increased its terrorist actions to demonstrate that it is not "going soft," to protect its militant credentials in the competition with Syria and Abu Musa.

--"The PLO and Arafat are eager for negotiations if only we give them reason to believe in our sincerity." As has been pointed out, the very process of serious diplomacy is more dangerous for them than waiting for better conditions while maintaining their internal unity and relations with Arab states.

These points do not mean that the United States should do nothing or view diplomatic efforts as futile. In fact, the current U.S. posture of refusing to deal with the PLO while insisting on a principal role for Jordan is an essentially effective method for protecting our interests and promoting a settlement:

--The Arab rejection of Camp David and the Reagan plan, as well as the unhappy U.S. experience in Lebanon, has demonstrated the "Arabist" conventional wisdom's inaccuracies. We must work hard to find a solution but be willing to wait for the proper conditions. The view that any solution is better than no solution is wrong.

--The Reagan plan seeks a solution of the Palestinian problem through

four principles: a peace agreement negotiated between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation; Jordanian primacy in the West Bank and Gaza in the framework of a federation with a large measure of Palestinian self-rule; Arab recognition of Israel; and border modifications to enhance Israel's security. These principles should not be abandoned.

--Israel and Jordan are our allies, not the PLO. Making concessions to the PLO not only undermines Israel's security but weakens King Hussein's stand in his struggle with Arafat. The United States is not going to win over the PLO -- our interests and objectives are too much in conflict.

--An independent Palestinian state would seriously damage U.S. interests. In some ways, this is tragic because one would like to see the Palestinian people enjoying self-determination and living in peace side-by-side with Israel. It is pleasant to fantasize about President Arafat limiting Soviet influence, reducing regional radicalism, mellowing Syria, and living at peace with his neighbors.

--But such a vision rests on disregarding everything we know and everything we have seen about the Middle East. Given the real PLO, the real Syria, and the real nature of inter-Arab and Palestinian politics, as well as the PLO's alliance - though not subservience - to Moscow, it is far more likely that something much less desirable would emerge. Such a state would support Soviet interests, threaten Israel and Jordan, and promote regional war and instability whether it is strong or weak. A strong Palestinian state would try to subvert its neighbors and advocate anti-American policies in the

region; a weak one would invite internal upheaval, be powerless to stop radicals from attacking its neighbors, and encourage foreign attempts to destabilize and radicalize it. No U.S. policymaker can risk creating such a situation on the basis of wishful thinking and vague assurances.

--The United States should continue to support direct face-to-face Arab-Israeli negotiations and oppose the international conference route which, would destroy the peace process and allow Arafat to escape any influence by Hussein.

--Finally, U.S. policy toward the PLO is far more reasonable and flexible than is often portrayed. The United States gives the PLO a choice: either it can recognize Israel through UN Resolution 242; or it can select non-PLO interlocutors to negotiate. If the PLO is unwilling to choose either of these two alternatives, it is clearly not interested in a negotiated solution.

Neither the Palestinian cause nor the PLO will disappear, but the idea that Arafat's perennial strategy -- Arab unity, Palestinian unity, "armed struggle" -- will bring him victory is a fantasy. For his part, Hussein has a more coherent plan: press the PLO toward accepting junior partnership; if it refuses, let it fail in its frozen militancy. If the Palestinian people look for another savior some time in the future, Jordan is available; if diplomatic progress is impossible for the present, Jordan is still better off than if it took a risky, unilateral initiative.

At the same time, the region's crises, tragedies, and dangers should not make us overlook the fact that the situation is not that bad from the standpoint of U.S. interests. A United States allied with Israel is as

influential in the Middle East today as it has been at any time in the last 20 years. The USSR's stock in the region is as low as it has been at any time since Moscow entered Middle Eastern politics in 1955.

While this paper emphasizes the reasons why so little can be expected of the PLO, it is important to remember that excessive optimism -- rather than critical skepticism -- has been the main source of despair about the pursuit of Middle East peace. The sad cycle has seen the PLO portrayed as "pragmatic," which becomes "reasonable," which becomes "moderate," which becomes "ready to negotiate," which leads to "peace is at hand," which inevitably ends in disappointment, confusion, and preparation for the next round of wishful thinking.



