

Palestinian Liberation Organization

1. Can the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) justifiably claim to be 'the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.'?

The PLO was set up in 1964 by an Arab League decision in response to growing signs of Palestinian unrest. The Palestinians desired to reclaim the lands occupied by Israel, which they felt belonged to them, as said in the Bible. In 1964 the Arab states created the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). While it was supposed to represent the Palestinians, in reality it represented the views of President Nasser of Egypt, who guided the formation of the PLO. Its first leader made wild and irresponsible threats to drive Israelis into the sea, and had little support among Palestinians for he was seen as a puppet of the Egyptians. In the 1960s Palestinian students began to form their own organizations independent of control by Arab governments (although the Syrians, Libyans, and Iraqis continued to fund and control particular groups). Yasser Arafat founded an independent Palestinian-run party called Fatah. He is said to have the backing, for most of the recent past, of about 80% of the Palestinian people. The position of the Arab governments was that a PLO under Arab League supervision would be the best way of satisfying the demands made by an emerging Palestinian national consciousness. Also, it was felt that through such an organization Arab governments could control Palestinian political activities.

Ten years after its founding, the PLO was raised to the status of government. And in 1988, the PLO's status was to be raised again, this time to a state in exile. After several negotiations, Arafat became a Terrorist leader and administrator of self-rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

In the 1967 Six Day War, the Arab armies did very badly against Israel, losing 67,000 square kilometres of land. Palestinians came to believe that if they were ever to have their land, they would have to do it themselves. After the 1967 war, the situation changed drastically. The resistance activities of various guerrilla organizations, in particular the Al-Fatah and the PFLP, gained the increasing support of the Palestinians. With Arafat at the helm from 1969 and a resistance-oriented leadership, the PLO was more effective and played a central role in mobilizing the Palestinians and in expanding its basis of support both at the local and international level. The PLO became an umbrella organization for the various guerrilla groups.

This increase in support was made possible because of the Al-Fatah's ability to access to the growing numbers of volunteers from refugee camps which were freshly swollen due to the 1967 war. Most of these refugees suffered the frustration of having been displaced twice in a lifetime. This generated, especially among the young, a mood of defiance, as they were ready to question the credibility of the idea of relying on Arab governments to liberate Palestine. Furthermore, as a consequence of the war a large proportion of

the Palestinian community became territorially united.

This brought the possibility of direct interaction between the various sections of the Palestinian community that had previously remained isolated from each other. On the other hand, the inability of the PLO's conservative leadership to promote any effective resistance operations culminated in the eventual transfer of power to the armed-struggle orientated guerrilla organizations. Thus initially, the PLO had a broad base of support and represented the desires of the majority of the Palestinian people.

The origins of the Al-Fatah can be traced back to the mid-1950s to a group of Palestinians that had neither relinquished their national identity nor their belief in the necessity of liberating Palestine via Palestinian means, rather than relying on other Arab states. Yet, throughout the 1950s the attitude of the Palestinians remained largely skeptical if not uncommitted to Al-Faith's ideology. It was in the 1960s that the situation began to change, enabling Al-Fatah to expand its organizational structure and base. Under the leadership of Arafat, Al-Fatah pursued an ideology which simply stresses the nationalist struggle to liberate Palestine without dwelling too deeply on any theoretical speculations about the nature and form of the future Palestinian society. This tactic was essential in gaining support against other movements, and aided the rise of Al-Fatah to become the dominating faction within the PLO.

Militarily, the PLO has a broad base of human resources for recruitment, almost half a million. The PLO has established across-the-board conscription for all the Palestinian men between the ages of 18 and 30. As a result, the PLO is able to maintain three military forces. It could be said then that physically, it did indeed represent a cross-section of the population. However, even if they were significant in number, these lower-level members were not politically potent, and did not have their voices heard. Arafat continued on his policies, tending to brush aside differing opinions, leaving many disenchanted with his autocratic rule.

Even before the PLO was declared a state in 1988, it functioned much like one. This was reflected in much of the powers it possessed. The PLO has been able to exert what amounts to sovereign powers over the Palestinian people in war situations. The PLO represented the Palestinians in wars with Jordan and Lebanon, and during various incursions into Israel.

The PLO also exercises extradition powers, as on many occasions Arab governments have turned over to the PLO Palestinians charged with criminal activities. They were tried and sentenced by the PLO judicial system. In these ways, it was supposed to represent the people.

But various problems within the PLO undermined its legitimacy as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

Arafat's ascendancy to power on the Palestinian issue had naturally provoked rivals to try the same tack in their own interest. As a result, maintenance of his supremacy within the

PLO became Arafat's full time preoccupation. Far from laying the basis for secular or democratic institutions that one day might serve as a nation, Arafat recruited Sunni Muslims like himself into a body known as Fatah, loyal to him on confessional lines.

Unity itself was a mere appearance, a show for the sake of recovering honour. Far from uniting behind the Palestinian cause as words might indicate, every Arab state in practice discriminated against Palestinians living in its midst and had differing slants upon the PLO. This was due to its nature as an umbrella organization, the PLO comprises a number of resistance organizations. These organizations entered the PLO as groups retaining their ideological and organizational identity. Consequently, PLO institutions are structured to reflect proportional representation of each organization in addition to the few independent members. This has turned PLO politics into coalition politics.

The flux of events between 1967 and 1982 offered Palestinians several chances to demonstrate en masse in favour of the PLO, if they had been so inclined. But they refrained, not due to fatalism or cowardice, but because they may be willing to pay lip service to Arafat, not much more than that.

Whether Palestinians outside the Occupied Territories would in fact accept the legitimacy of the PLO as their representative was put to test in Jordan in 1970. Jordanian frontiers were the result of British map-making, which left half of the country's inhabitants Palestinian by origin. The rapid financing and arming by Arab power holders of Arafat's mercenaries offered these Palestinians in Jordan a chance to repudiate King Hussein and declare themselves nationalists for the new cause. Unexpectedly, Arafat's power challenge threatened to replace King Hussein with a PLO state in Jordan. After 18 months, while tensions were running high, the PFLP hijacked international airliners, three of which were brought at gunpoint to Jordan. Taking advantage of this anarchic jockeying between rival Palestinian groups, King Hussein ordered his army to subjugate the whole movement. Palestinians in Jordan and on the West Bank gave evidence of their real feelings by denouncing the PLO and PFLP activists to the authorities and occasionally even helping to round them up.

David Pryce-Jones observed that "wherever they live, they observe for themselves that the PLO is a means to enrichment and aggrandizement for the unscrupulous few, but death and destruction for everyone else". Everywhere Palestinians have little alternative but to cling to this identity, as they continue to seek what freedom they can from power holders of different identity. In Syria, any Palestinian who attempted to form some independent grouping would be seen as a dangerous conspirator and summarily disposed of. This left many with no choice but to remain silent.

Fatah itself was split by power struggles initiated by a growing number of young Fatah activists who were trying to gain positions of power in local society, in the process challenging

the older generation of Fatah leaders. They felt entitled to positions in the structures Arafat was trying to create. The newest generation of people not only refuse to be cajoled or coerced, but also have acquired political organizing and networking skills in neighbourhoods, refugee camps, Israeli jails, and above all, in the political bodies created during the Intifada (uprising).

The problem of factionalism has plagued the PLO from its formation. However, instead of adopting a policy of inclusion to accommodate the general goals of the people, he excluded not only the opposition but also the local Palestinians who had acted as his proxies before his return. He had promised he would be the leader of all Palestinians, but acted only like the President of his trusted lieutenants. Instead of speaking of tolerance and political pluralism, he spoke of respect for his authority.

On top of this, Arafat's leadership was questioned. Arafat was criticized for filling his posts with loyalists whose professional qualifications are below average and whose reputations are tarnished. Other appointments brought more and more Palestinians to the conclusion that Arafat was mired in the past, and that he would continue to follow the policy plans he had formed long ago. The Chairman's primacy within the PLO had been seriously compromised as a result of the secret negotiations that had led to the September 13, 1993 agreement with the Rabin government. The relationship with the masses that the charismatic Arafat had enjoyed was diminished by the concessions he made to Israel.

In modern day politics, he still remains a symbol of Palestinian nationalism, as does the PLO. But he faces much opposition. On the left various socialist groups think Arafat is too close to business and banking interests and too willing to negotiate with Israel or cooperate with America. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine is one of these. It is led by George Habash, a Christian doctor. It opposes any negotiations. On the right some Islamic groups feel the PLO is too willing to cooperate with socialists and is too willing to negotiate with Israel. They feel there should be a united Palestine where Jews could live but which would not be governed by Jews. The largest of these groups is called HAMAS, the Islamic Resistance Movement. Several Palestinian radicals have their own military organizations. Abu Nidal is one of these. He is bitterly and violently opposed to the PLO for what he sees as its moderate positions. He has carried out airplane bombings and attacks on civilians and has tried to assassinate Arafat. He opposes any negotiation with Israel. He is probably funded by Iraq.

In the latest turn of events, Yasser Arafat has decided to scrap the anti-Israeli section of the PLO charter calling for its destruction. Some have said that this is due to Israeli pressure in the peace process, which demanded the change before new talks and settlements. Shimon Peres has called it the "most important ideological change of the century", but it is sure to upset the Islamic fundamentalists, and those in the PLO who desire a completely pro-PLO solution. While there is so

much contention and opposition to PLO decisions, the PLO cannot be called the sole representative of the Palestinian people, although it has a large following.

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