

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE Va. 13

THE WASHINGTON POST  
3 January 1980

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# Enigmatic Role of the PLO in Iran

One of the murkier mysteries of the Tehran situation is the involvement of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its crafty leader, Yasser Arafat, in the embassy takeover and the negotiations for the hostages' release.

The pistol-packing Arafat's role is so enigmatic, in fact, that our intelligence agencies disagree sharply in their assessment of his actions. Some of my sources say they believe Arafat honestly tried to mediate the crisis, as he claimed. Others are convinced the PLO leader's ballyhooed mediation effort was a sham.

The one thing about which both schools of thought agree is that Arafat saw the hostage situation as an opportunity to gain favorable publicity for the PLO in the United States. Whether his mediation attempt was sincere, or whether it was simply a cover for a more sinister mission—assuring the Iranians of Soviet support in the event of U.S. military action—the PLO would still look like a friend in need to the United States.

There is an even more Byzantine possibility, my sources tell me: Arafat may have had a hand in the planning and execution of the embassy takeover from the start. Intelligence experts note that in the past—for example, the seizure of the Egyptian Embassy in Turkey in July—the PLO assumed a spurious mediator role in a situation it had instigated.

In support of this theory, it should be pointed out that some of the so-called students had almost certainly been trained by the PLO, and may have been accompanied in the embassy takeover by young Palestinian guerrillas with PLO connections.

It is also known that, after the shah's overthrow, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini asked the PLO for help in training a security force because he doubted the reliability of the Iranian army.

The PLO sent Abu Sharad, who is now the equivalent of the head of the secret service in the Iranian revolutionary regime, and Hasin Hassam, who is now Khomeini's minister of defense. Intelligence analysts who lean to the view that Khomeini personally engineered the embassy seizure say that he would have used his PLO-trained security force for the job.

The PLO connection with the Iranian revolutionaries goes back a number of years. The Palestinian guerrillas provided training, arms and money to the antishah rebels. And the PLO made no secret of its delight at Khomeini's victory.

The PLO's public posture in the crisis might best be called contradictory. While Arafat's representatives were supposedly trying to negotiate the hostages' release, the PLO's man on the scene in Tehran, Hani Al-Hasan, was stating flatly that "we are not mediators."

He also issued a ringing message of support for the Iranians against the United States. "The PLO puts all its forces, armed and unarmed, at the disposal of Khomeini, to fight against any American intervention, inside and outside Iran," he said.

There was also a report, which I have confirmed independently, that Palestinian guerrillas were the ones who mined the Tehran embassy after the United States hinted it might use

force to free the hostages. Those Palestinians may not have been acting for Arafat, however.

Among intelligence sources who say they believe Arafat's mediation attempt was sincere, there is a report that PLO officials are still secretly negotiating in Tehran for the release of the hostages.

These sources say the negotiations have been kept quiet to prevent a public outcry from radical Palestinians and to protect the PLO mediators from possible violence.