

ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE WASHINGTON TIMES 1-A

WASHINGTON TIMES
17 October 1985

THE PLO DEAD OR ALIVE?

By Don McLeod
and Deborah Papier
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Parading through the United Nations with his empty gun holster on display, beaming through his whiskers in meetings with leaders of the Western world as well as of the Arab community, Yasser Arafat during the 1970s seemed a genuinely historic figure.

He had achieved the nearly impossible goal of converting an outlaw terrorist organization into the internationally recognized government-in-exile of a state that did not even exist.

The movement he headed — the Palestine Liberation Organization — had succeeded in gaining recognition as the sole credible voice of the stateless Palestinian people.

In the West, only the United States and Israel refused to deal with the Soviet-allied organization that had as its stated purpose not only the creation of a Palestinian state, but the destruction of Israel.

The promised land seemed within Mr. Arafat's reach; the destruction of Israel would have to wait.

But now the Middle East drama seems to have taken a new twist, and given Mr. Arafat a very new role. Driven from his military stronghold in Lebanon, standing in the rubble of the Tunisian camp that was his headquarters until it was bombed by Israeli jet fighters, and reeling from the botched hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro, Mr. Arafat has diminished steadily.

His leadership is under attack from within and without his organization. Even if he survives, some say he soon lead a movement without hope or relevance.

"Arafat is now more dependent than ever on his friends and more vulnerable to his enemies," says a Middle East analyst. "Arafat's been

on the ropes for three years, and he looks bad," says another source.

Abraham Foxman, associate national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, believes the PLO basically has been "in decline since 1982." Since the war in Lebanon, in which Israeli forces destroyed the PLO's power position there and forced the organization to disperse around the Arab world, he says, "it has lost its operating base and had to scatter its sources and resources. Since '82 there is more splintering, there isn't the central control. Arafat doesn't have a place where he can feed them and house them and provide for them."

Zedhi Terzi, the PLO's delegate at the United Nations, concedes that the 1982 defeat "did weaken our military wing. We have our forces spread all over the Arab world, which I think is a weakening of our armed apparatus. Deployment becomes more difficult."

Most everyone warns against writing Arafat off too soon, however. "He has had 19 lives," says one observer. So has the PLO itself, metamorphosing from an arm of the anti-Israeli cause of onetime Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, to a civil-war threat in Jordan, to the political arbiter of a fractured Lebanon, and now again a scattered terrorist organization. Says Terzi: "I think we're still doing fine; we survive."

But there is a telltale character to recent PLO terrorist acts: a distinct trace of angst, an uncharacteristic ineptitude of operation, the absence of clearly defined goals or intent — and a high failure rate. Other than a senseless murder, the hijacking of the Achille Lauro accomplished nothing more for the pirates than a global media blitz that made them

look more incompetent than intimidating — that is, to all but Leon Klinghoffer, the 69-year-old wheelchair-bound Manhattanite killed at least in part because he was a Jew. Initially, there were the usual demands that imprisoned terrorists

be freed, but in the end this gang appeared interested only in getting away whole — and they failed even at that.

The real impact of this episode was that it flashed the image of a dangerously dormant PLO across the world. Although it may be some time before the true details are known, indications were that publicity may have been the hijacking's only result.

To reach that conclusion, analysts look at the position of Arafat, perched in a blasted camp in Tunis with a handful of bodyguards and an administrative cadre, commanding a distant and scattered army devoid of effective armament, and removed by more than 1,400 miles from his nemesis Israel. He was swept from Lebanon three years ago, his shame compounded by his getaway on ships loaned by the hated Americans. His Arab brothers scarcely lifted a hand to help when Israeli forces prepared to annihilate his battered army. The Lebanon debacle robbed Arafat of his last facility for direct military action against Israel. It reduced his options, and it made pursuing new ones dangerous. In old-fashioned Western slang, Yasser Arafat is between a rock and a hard spot. He is a man of impressive assets but shrinking prospects.

"What Arafat has is the support of the great majority of [the 4.5 million] Palestinians," says one congressional source. Other observers point to the strength Arafat derives from being the one recognized and stable leader in the whole movement.

The PLO is actually an umbrella organization composed of at least eight main groups — chief among them Arafat's al-Fatah, with 10,000 to 15,000 fedayeen (fighters) — and numerous factions. The splintering has become especially frequent since the defeat in Lebanon. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Arafat's onetime ally, has waged a war for control of the PLO, hoping to fold in PLO strength with his rapidly modernizing and powerful armed forces.

Says Terzi, considered Arafat's man: "[The defeat in Lebanon] was followed by that the Syrian government was directly involved, of trying to destroy us from within." Terzi mentions Syrian-backed attacks on pro-Arafat refugee camps in Beirut this year: "They [pro-Syrian Palestinians] resorted to the use of their artillery against their own people."

Other groups report to the Iraqis and the Libyans. Two Marxist units — the Popular Front for the Liber-

ation of Palestine, run by Arafat's longtime rival George Habash; and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, run by Nayif Hawatmeh — together claim more than 7,000 members and answer directly to Moscow.

Says Yoram Ettinger, Israeli consul general in Houston and a recognized authority on the PLO: "Arab leaders, like Syria, have seized the opportunity of the decline of the

PLO in Lebanon to further their hold over some elements within the organization."

Still, the rest of the Arab world channels its financial assistance through Arafat. Saudi Arabia alone provides more than \$85 million a year. And in addition to this institutional support, there is the contribution of the Palestinian diaspora. Scattered about the world, including several sizable communities in major U.S. cities, these Palestinian emigres are generally industrious people who earn good wages. The Palestinian "guest workers" who power the industrial machine of the oil-rich states around the Persian Gulf donate 5 percent of their incomes to the PLO. U.S. officials estimate the PLO has at least \$5 billion in assets.

"Now as long as that money's all running through Arafat's hands, Arafat's a powerful guy," the congressional source says. But there may be some strain in PLO finances, and the strain may be getting worse. This is probably unrelated to Arafat's political-military problems. But Arab oil states, who have been paying baksheesh to Arafat, are feeling the oil glut, and the Saudi "development assistance" to the PLO has declined dramatically — from perhaps as much as \$1 billion in the late 1970s. With the oil glut, the Saudis and others are laying off some of their work force. This means that the flow of donations from guest workers is diminishing.

Arafat's primary strength, however, is that he has better international connections than any other comparable figure in the PLO. More than 100 governments recognize him as the head of the PLO, which they consider the sole legitimate representative body of the Palestinians. It also is recognized by the

Soviet Union as the only governing authority over Palestine. (The Soviets do not have diplomatic relations with Israel.) The PLO was the first so-called liberation movement to be granted observer-state status at the United Nations.

Writes Aaron David Miller, a State Department official and leading scholar on the Middle East: "The PLO has some form of diplomatic representation in more countries than actually recognize Israel and has a budget and infrastructure larger than those of many Third World states." This is near-miraculous for a state without a

country, a government without territory. Arafat's army all but disappeared in the Lebanon showdown of 1982, when it was caught between Israeli and Syrian forces, but portions escaped to fight another day.

Best estimates are that as many as 8,000 armed Palestinians have re-established themselves in Lebanon, although under the eye if not the thumb of Syria's Assad. There are another 2,500 in North and South Yemen, including a marshaling and training base on Kamaran Island in the Red Sea. Other surviving Palestinian fighters are believed to be in Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, Jordan, Libya, Cyprus, Iran and Pakistan. There also are an estimated 5,000 part-time Palestinian guerrillas at Eastern European uni-

versities, their studies financed by the PLO.

"The organization is probably at one of its lowest points, and it has been since '82," says another government expert. "But there's still a lot of armed people out there, and there's still a lot of loyalty to certain members of the PLO senior command. The anti-Arafat groups are stronger, as strong as Arafat right now, but they're all loyal to what they think of as the Palestinian cause."

After the Achille Lauro fiasco, Arafat may be forced to take drastic face-saving action, and given the U.S. capture of the PLO hijackers,

the next target may well be American. The United States is patently vulnerable to such attacks, and there are many methods the PLO could use: car-bombings and airport and bus station raids, among others. The PLO already has a large network of sympathizers and supporters in place in the United States, ranging from the Marxist left to anti-Semitic black racists and white supremacists.

Arab politicians dance carefully around the reasons for the recent frenzy of terrorist acts. Terzi explains in diplomat's language: "We have always envisaged the course of our struggle as a diplomatic strategy and a military strategy. We have been trying our utmost to pursue a diplomatic thrust, but we never

gave up on armed struggle." Adds the Arab League's United Nations Observer Clovis Maksoud: "The more the futility of the diplomatic option becomes obvious, the more radicalized is the constituency. Yet it has not reached the stage of giving up on the diplomatic, political option — not as an alternative to resistance, but as a complementarity to it." Thus, the result: terrorism.

Since the Israelis drove the PLO from Lebanon, Arafat has had to redirect his thinking from commanding what once was a regular army in south Lebanon back to bombing school buses and murdering innocents. Since he no longer could shell Israel he had to resort to other means.

Says Ray S. Cline, former deputy director of the CIA: "It is a myth that Arafat never had any responsibility for the more militant terrorist activity of the various wings of the PLO; he simply had positioned himself in a public front position where he could disclaim responsibility, and I believe there were many operations that he probably didn't control."

"Just as the Soviet leaders in Moscow truly can say they don't control all the operations, Arafat doesn't control all the operations. Both Moscow and Arafat have a good bit of influence over what happens: They have encouraged the climate of violence and they do know about and probably authorize certain selected terrorist activities."

Two years of licking his wounds and fighting internecine battles in his organization brought Arafat to an odd juncture. He began talking peace with Jordan's King Hussein, and terrorist activity against Israel began to pick up at the same time. In the first six months of this year, Arafat's commanders claimed responsibility for anti-Israeli terrorist acts

that included hijackings, bombings and a train derailment. From February through May, the claims — not always confirmed by Israel — averaged 10 a month.

The Israelis made their first serious concession in history to the PLO when on May 20 they gave in to demands for a prisoner exchange, swapping 1,150 captured Palestinians for three Israeli soldiers. The move was controversial within Israel, which has always advocated no discussion or concessions whatever. The following month, the PLO claimed responsibility for 32 terrorist acts — nearly twice its total for the previous five months. They claimed only nine attacks in July; but if spring violence consisted of

many scattered sparks, mid- and late-summer incidents were fires that threatened to set fall ablaze. The Israelis claim to have intercepted numerous seaborne PLO teams attempting to enter their country in recent months.

Israel went back to work hunting terrorists. On July 21, Israeli troops stormed two south Lebanon villages. At least three villagers were reported killed in the raid. Twelve days later, Israeli officials reported finding leaflets encouraging terrorist activity against Israel, distributed on the campus of Al-Najah University in Nablus on the West Bank. The university was ordered closed for two months.

Two months after releasing the 1,150 prisoners, the Israeli Cabinet took strong action Aug. 4 to crack down on terrorism. Measures included deportations of persons constituting a security risk, indefinite "administrative detention" without charges for Arabs suspected of security offenses, increase of prison capacity in the West Bank, and the closure of Arab newspapers violating censorship by publishing inflammatory material.

The battle continued. On Sept. 3, two Israeli soldiers were knifed by Arabs; one of the soldiers later died of his wounds. Shortly after the stabbings, several Soviet-made Katyusha rockets reportedly struck northwestern Israel, near the Lebanese border.

The next day, Israel announced it would attack guerrilla centers in Jordan if Hussein did not expel Palestinians from the Jordanian capital. Israeli warplanes attacked what they said was a Palestinian guerrilla base in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Israel claimed it destroyed four buildings housing the Palestinian Arab Revolutionary Committee.

The battle erupted into a small war Sept. 25, when three Palestinians boarded an Israeli yacht harbored in Larnaca, Cyprus. Three Israeli civilians — two men and one woman — were killed. The attackers had hoped to trade their victims for a group of Palestinians intercepted by Israel the previous month en route to Lebanon. Israel had said the captured Palestinians were planning raids against the Jewish state. The next day Arab gunmen opened fire on a public bus in the West Bank. Seven people were injured. Hundreds of Jews retaliated by smashing windows in West Bank Arab homes. The demonstrators also stoned a village mosque, causing heavy damage.

Finally, on Oct. 1, Israeli jets flew nearly 1,500 miles from home to strike PLO headquarters near Tunis as retaliation for the Larnaca murders. Israeli intelligence pinpointed the Larnaca terrorists as members of Force 17, Arafat's armed bodyguard. The strike also served as a deadly reminder to Arafat that he could not escape retaliation, and that his ability to mount attacks against Israel was dwindling.

In the same period, Arafat was working the other side of the street, in the typical war-diplomacy style of the PLO. On Feb. 11 of this year, Arafat and Jordan's Hussein signed a dramatic agreement, which was the first acceptance by the PLO leader of the idea that the conflict with Israel might be settled peaceably. It did not repeat the long-standing Palestinian demand for an independent state, but hinted rather at a Palestinian state federated with Jordan — a highly qualified revision of Ronald Reagan's September 1982 peace plan.

Just as significantly, it suggested that Palestinians be part of a joint delegation with the Jordanians at a new round of Middle East peace talks. Then in May, Hussein remarked to reporters on the White House lawn that Arafat was ready to accept U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338, which essentially recognize Israel's national legitimacy, something the PLO and most Arab nations steadfastly have refused to do. Both Hussein and Arafat later hedged on these trial balloons but did not quite burst them.

The peace process Hussein put forth calls for meetings between a U.S. delegation and a Palestinian-Jordanian delegation. At the first meeting the Palestinian group would include no PLO representatives, but in the scenario outlined by U.S. experts with an eye on the process, the United States would be called on for a statement that it recognizes the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination — within the context of a confederation with Jordan. This would be a monumental, and risky, first step for the United States, which has not supported Palestinian self-determination before. In response to this opening concession by the United States, Arafat would then formally state his acceptance of U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338 and the right of Israel to exist as a nation.

"If the PLO now recognizes Israel, there's no reason for us not to meet with the PLO," a U.S. insider says. "Those meetings are supposed to help plan an international conference — probably under the auspices of the [U.N.] Security Council, which means inviting the Soviets — in which all parties to the conflict would meet, including the Israelis, including the PLO."

The snag from the U.S. and Israeli perspectives is the prospect of inviting the Soviet Union back into the picture, "causing all sorts of mischief," as one doubter puts it. "As far as I can see, that problem remains the nut that they haven't cracked, and therefore we haven't moved very far since May." The Israelis have let it be known they would like to talk directly with Hussein — but not with Arafat attached, and certainly not in

any circumstance that would reintroduce Soviet interference.

The plan had considerable support within the Reagan administration, particularly from Richard Murphy, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Debate raged within the State Department, but reportedly Secretary of State George P. Shultz has thrown cold water on the plan for now.

Several experts express strong doubts that any of this could work anyway, beginning with doubt about Arafat's good intentions. Additionally, there is the problem of Syria's Assad, who appears more interested in co-opting the PLO than helping it reconcile differences with Israel. At the very least, they say, Syria would want to achieve military parity with Israel before agreeing to any general settlement of the Middle East problem — or before trying in earnest to get rid of Assad's enemy. On the other hand, the same observers feel that every nation involved in the decades-long struggle is weary of the cost in money, lives and national morale, and that the Arab states, despite expected public denials, finally recognize that Israel will not be driven into the sea as they promised in 1948.

"Palestinians are at a crossroad between becoming the Kurds of the Arab world, an eternal diaspora, never gaining any of their rights, or moving forward to peace with Israel and regaining at least some of their legitimate rights and recognition of their Palestinian nationalism. In the absence of making peace with Israel they're never going to get what they want, and Israel is a fact that is not going to be overcome. I don't think even Arafat dreams of recovering Tel Aviv," says a U.S. observer.

A U.S. analyst poses the following dilemma: "[Arafat's] problem is, if he is interested in making peace with Israel, how does he do that while maintaining any kind of cohesion within his organization? And then you have to ask yourself what's more important to him: maintaining the organization, or moving toward peace?"

Continued

"Now, that may seem like a funny kind of question, but the history of it is that maintaining internal cohesion within that organization has been more important than looking toward peace. You take a look at Arab leaders who have thought about making peace with Israel, and I wouldn't want to sell them life insurance."

Working both sides of the street is nothing new to Arafat, but it is becoming increasingly dangerous as his options narrow. With his military capability stunted, diplomacy becomes more important — and this is more obvious to everyone watching him, friend or foe.

"His opponents say he is selling out," says an expert. "We say he is not moving quickly enough."

But the collapse of Lebanon has changed the circumstances in which Arafat must figure these things. "We now have a situation within the Palestinian community of differences of approach of how to regain the lost territory," a U.S. expert says. "Arafat argues he's willing to take a diplomatic approach. Others say the only way we're going to do it is via armed struggle."

Says a Middle East analyst: "The PLO is trapped between its past and its future" — a past of hard-line poli-

tics, terrorist military action, and Syrian and Soviet patronage; and a possible future tied to a peace initiative, closer ties with Jordan's Hussein and eventually with the United States and Israel. "Arafat probably realizes the course he would like to follow," the analyst speculates, "but he is shackled by the organization that he heads and the revolutionary principles of a movement he helped create."

Arafat's position as chairman of the PLO is the work of the Palestine National Council, a quasi-legislative forum in which the PLO's disparate elements meet and fight. It gathers irregularly (17 times in the past 21 years) to determine matters of policy, elect the equivalent of a Cabinet and choose the chairman.

By charter, Arafat's al-Fatah has 33 seats on the approximately 400-member council, and other factions of the armed forces also have a fixed number of representatives. According to Terzi, those commando groups make up about a third of the membership; another third comes from refugee camps. The last large group is from organizations such as trade unions, chambers of commerce, student groups and professional associations; these groups have representation based on their size. Finally, there is the 10 percent of the council that is unaffiliated. "They are the independents," says Terzi, "individuals selected by the council

for the expertise they can contribute." This group includes some U.S. citizens.

When the council does convene, one of the main orders of business is to hear reports from the executive committee, whose 15 members function like a Cabinet, with each person in charge of a department — education, foreign affairs, etc. After submitting their reports, the committee members hand in their resig-

nations, and a new committee is elected by the council as a whole.

The members of the executive committee are charged with the task of selecting a PLO chairman. However, last year Arafat stage-managed a vote of support from the floor by threatening to lay down his mantle.

Despite the challenges to him — from Syria, Libya and others — Arafat is not likely to lose his job. Says Palestinian journalist Ghassan Bishara, Washington correspondent for the Jerusalem-based newspaper Al-Fajr: "For better or for worse, he has become a symbol. But I would not say he is a figurehead. If you would attend meetings of the Palestine National Council and see Arafat in action, he's very effective." The Arab League's Maksoud believes that despite opposition Arafat "remains a credible representative of the mainstream."

According to Bradley Gordon, the Middle East expert on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff: "If Arafat isn't there, there's nobody left from within the Palestinian community who has the authority to sign on the bottom line."

Nonetheless, Arafat is under attack from within his movement, and the only possible way through the maze, the experts say, is to continue pressing diplomacy and war at the same time. Since his direct military capability is gone, war for the time being translates into terrorism — such as the hijacking of the Achille Lauro.

Compounding Arafat's problem is the rising popularity of terrorism in the Middle East. Other dissident groups have taken up the same tactic and diluted or even defeated the impact of Palestinian terrorism. The average Westerner no longer can tell one group of hijackers from another. No single group's message is getting through.

Arafat's political situation has made it difficult for him to abandon terrorism altogether: A certain amount of fury has been necessary to prove he hasn't gone soft. But Western analysts have begun to observe a trend of what some classify as a kind of "controlled terror"

— not against Israelis, toward whom the PLO is as bloody as ever, but in relation to the West.

"I think what that means is they're so conscious of the political effect," a government analyst says. "they want to scare them and get the political capital. They don't really want to blow up the plane, but they want you to know they can blow up the plane; so every once in a while they have to do it."

"It's like the killings. What you do is you kill one or two, and that proves to everyone else that you can do more, and it really strengthens your negotiating position. If you kill a whole mess of them, you're going to get stormed. So what you want to do is kill one to show you're serious and then not kill the others and keep the Delta Force types at bay while you try to get your political concessions."

The problem may be that the combination of diplomatic showmanship and guerrilla warfare has become too ingrained in the Palestinian psyche to shake off. It is a method wrought from bitter experience. At first the Palestinians were given little part in determining their own fate. When the United Nations voted in 1947 to partition Palestine, giving Jews a portion for their homeland and Palestinians a portion for theirs, the Arab world said "no" with virtually a single voice. About two-thirds of the Palestinian community left the country when the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 broke out, some from a natural fear of war, some driven out, and many at the urging of the Arab states of the region, who assured them that the Jews would be driven from the land. This did not happen.

The early Palestinian leadership that had followed this bad advice was discredited when promises to prevent the establishment of an Israeli state failed. It took a generation for the Palestinian community, which had been whipsawed by the war, to recover its own direction.

"That was why between 1948 and 1968 you never heard anybody talking about a Palestinian state," a congressional expert explains. "The talk was about border rectification between Jordan, which controlled the West Bank, and Israel and solving the refugee problem, as opposed to solving the national problem of the Palestinians. For 20 years you didn't hear anything about Palestinian nationalism."

It was the Six-Day War of 1967, in which the Israeli army decisively crushed the Arab opposition, that finally convinced Palestinians they could not count on other countries to give them their land back. The PLO was created in 1964, originally as a planned appendage to the Pan-Arab movement of Egypt's Nasser, but by 1967 it was an independent force.

"For the first time in 20 years they were actually trying to do something about their own fate," one scholar says. "There was an aura of romanticism about it. Young Palestinians were willing to go out and die for the cause."

The PLO grew so rapidly that, in addition to harrasing Israel from its base on the West Bank of the Jordan River, it became a threat to the Jordanian government of Hussein. In a 1970 war, Hussein's army drove the PLO from the country. But after relocating in Lebanon, the PLO found itself in perhaps an even better position to attack Israeli settlements directly with Soviet-supplied artillery and rockets. In June 1982, however, Israel had had enough and invaded Lebanon to clear out the Palestinians. In August the PLO fled aboard a U.S.-provided armada. The next year, PLO forces had to abandon the Lebanese city of Tripoli as well.

And, although the Israelis have won every war so far, they know this alone will not solve their problems. "From the Israeli point of view, not making peace means retaining the West Bank and Gaza," a U.S. analyst says, "which means they have another million, million and a half Arabs to rule over, who have a very high birthrate, who they either keep in second- or third-class citizenship or not citizens at all, under an occupying authority that could become uglier and uglier, that erodes the moral base of the state. Create another South Africa? That's not the Zionist vision."

Although there still is and will be hard-line resistance among some Israelis to any concessions to the Palestinians, policy has softened in recent years. "The ruling position in Israel is: How do we get to peace?" a U.S. Middle East specialist says. "The question is, how do we get from here to there, and at this point everybody's looking at the United States and the United States doesn't have any answers. They're working on it; they just haven't figured out a way to handle it."

This swings the spotlight back to Tunis and Yasser Arafat, who seems to be clinging still to a worn-out policy of simultaneous war and peace. "He has only one card to play," the U.S. official says. "And that is recognition of Israel."

Why, then, does he hesitate? "Well, if he doesn't play it fairly soon, there's going to be no card left to play," the official says. "There will be nothing left to negotiate over. The West Bank would ... would be absorbed."

Virtually everyone agrees this would not mean the end of Arafat or the PLO. "There will be a Palestinian movement," one official says, "but how relevant will it be?"

"Arafat and the PLO will always be there," says another, "but pretty soon it won't matter, because there won't be anything left to negotiate over. And that's not a happy outcome, because it creates a ground for instability in the Arab world."

In his book "The PLO and the Politics of Survival," Aaron David Miller predicts that if current efforts fail the PLO "will become increasingly irrelevant to any negotiated settlement," that it "could ... ultimately emerge as a more radicalized and far less independent and cohesive element in the course of any resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict" and that fragmented and prolonged terrorist warfare "would be sustained by the bitter realities of a permanent Palestinian diaspora."

If Palestinians cannot find a compromise homeland in today's offering of opportunities, they may never go home again.

Staff members Susan Katz, John Rees and Derk Kinnane Roelofsma contributed to this article