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# THE PLO DEAD OR ALIVE?

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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-