The Palestinian Left and Its Decline
Loyal Opposition

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To Benedetta.

Preface

This book deals with the history of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) during its declining phase, namely between the 1982 PLO eviction from Lebanon and the crystallisation of the Hamas-Fatah split in 2007. Being historically the main Marxist force within the Palestinian national movement, the PFLP's marginalisation process affected the condition of the whole Palestinian Left. The entire leftist camp, notwithstanding its chronic fragmentation, described itself as alternative to Fatah domination, and later also to Hamas' rise, thus the specificities and factors behind the PFLP's decline did not leave the other organisations untouched.

The supposedly alternative that the Palestinian Left embodied had nonetheless to face significant contradictions that would emerge in full strength after the shocking changes which 1982 brought to the PLO paradigms of action. Claiming to represent an alternative, a counterhegemonic political project that rivalled Fatah's strategy for liberation came to be increasingly at odds with the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's unquestioned loyalty to the Fatah-dominated PLO. Such "loyal opposition" ultimately entailed the relinquishment of all counterhegemonic role, undermining the *raison d'être* of a revolutionary Left that, notably in the PFLP's case, still nominally adhered to the creation of a socialist, democratic state all over the land of historic Palestine. This book examines the PFLP's political agency to unveil how such relinquishment happened and to illustrate what dynamics and behaviours it produced. This meant construing the PFLP's process of decline as the result of inefficient policy

making rather than the mechanic result of fateful, external events such as the collapse of "Existing Socialism". A focused analysis of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's marginalisation is long overdue, and this book aims at starting to make up such shortcoming of Palestinian political historiography. This kind of perspectives on Palestinian politics are all the more urgent as the Palestinian national movement continues to experience an unresolvable crisis that has deprived its main actors of much of their political legitimacy. The absence of a credible Palestinian Left is thus part and parcel of the current political paralysis in a time of unprecedented attacks to Palestinian self-determination on both a local and a global scale.

Historians and political scientists working on the contemporary Palestinian national movement might find this book beneficial, but I hope that the ideas and concepts that it developed will be interesting to academics and students focusing on the whole Middle East and North Africa and beyond. This volume contributes to the wider discussion on how leftist national liberation movements handled their relations with nationalism and, more specifically, on how they acted within a political arena dominated by nationalist forces and discourses. Moreover, in light of its chronology, this book also addresses the issue of leftist radical renewal in a post-Soviet world. That is why, after a detailed analysis of the PFLP's trajectory, a separate chapter features a parallel analysis of two leftist movements that faced similar challenges: the Egyptian communist movement and the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

I took the first steps in the research behind this volume almost a decade ago, during my final year as a master's student at the Department of Asian and North African Studies in the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. During those times, I was fortunate enough to find in Massimiliano Trentin a supportive supervisor who wisely guided me in the first elaborations of my ideas. Ever since, Massimiliano became a colleague and a friend with whom collaboration continues fruitfully and if this book has seen the light it is also thanks to his constant professional and personal support. The time spent in Palestine has been crucial in the ideation of this book for obvious reasons. My stays in Ramallah and Bir Zeit would have not been so enriching without the presence and friendship of Nicola and Farah. They opened to me not only the doors of their Ramallah home, but also those of the local academic community. I am thankful to their Palestinian family for helping me to reach out to veterans of Palestinian politics whose insights have been extremely important to my research. I also thank particularly Nicola for sharing his experience with me throughout the last eight years.

My doctoral studies at the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in the University of Edinburgh were a central step in the development of the ideas and analyses that became the core of this book. My gratitude goes to Anthony Gorman, my PhD first supervisor, for the time spent discussing the subject of my research and for his precious advices. I am also thankful to Thomas Pierret whose stimulating comments helped me to improve my look on the history of the Palestinian Left. In Edinburgh I met many people who deserve acknowledgement for their support, but I would like to mention in particular two of them: Sarah, for her uncommon encouragement and for her constant help, and Abla, who assisted me several times in the process of collecting important information.

Beirut, and specifically the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies, has been the main location of my archival research. The librarians' helpfulness allowed me to retrieve the material I needed in a friendly and professional environment. I am also grateful to the Council for British Research in the Levant for providing a travel grant which was essential in ensuring the success of my fieldwork in the Lebanese capital. Lebanon is the place of some of my dearest memories and for this I am grateful to Oriol and Ilaria: they allowed me in their home and treated me like family. I would like to thank all those people who accepted to talk to me about their political experience within the Palestinian national movement. I cannot name them here, but they had a fundamental role in the creation of this book. It is my sympathy towards the Palestinians' rightful quest for liberation and self-determination that led me to become interested in the history of their national movement. I hope that the honest efforts behind this book honour the lives and struggle of all those who fought and still fight for justice in Palestine and Israel.

I am thankful to my parents for their unquestioned trust in my ideas and aspirations, their support has always been a priceless certainty. This book is dedicated to Benedetta, to whom goes my most profound gratitude for her strengthening presence, for filling my life with meaning and for inspiring me to be a better man.

Verona, Italy
26 February 2020

Francesco Saverio Leopardi

Note on Transliteration

Arabic words are transliterated following the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Diacritics have not been employed with the exception of ʾ for *hamza* (vocal suspension) and ʿ for ʿayn (guttural consonant). Arabic and foreign names have been transliterated according to their most common version in British English.

Contents

Abbreviations

AMB	Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades
ANM	Arab Nationalists Movement
APF	Alliance of Palestinian Forces
BDS	Boycott Divestment and Sanctions
CPE	Communist Party of Egypt
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DA	Democratic Alliance
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
DG	Democratic Gathering
DoP	Declaration of Principles
ECP	Egyptian Communist Party
EMNL	Egyptian Movement for National Liberation
FPR	Forces of Popular Resistance
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions
GUPW	General Union of Palestinian Women
Hadetu	al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya li-l-Taharrur al-Watani (Democratic Movement for National Liberation)
Hamas	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement)
JCP	Jordanian Communist Party
JRA	Japanese Red Army
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
LF	Lebanese Forces
LNDF	Lebanese National Democratic Front
LNM	Lebanese National Movement
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
NA	National Alliance

NFLP	National Front for the Liberation of Palestine
NGC	National Guidance Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIHC	National and Islamic Higher Committee for the Follow-Up of the Intifada
NSF	National Salvation Front
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PCC	Palestine Central Council
PCP	Palestine Communist Party
PF-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLF	Palestinian Liberation Front
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
PNC	Palestine National Council
PNF	Palestinian National Front
PNGO	Palestinian NGOs Network
PNI	Palestinian National Initiative
PNO	Popular Nasserist Organisation
PNSF	Palestine National Salvation Front
PPP	Palestine People's Party
PPSF	Palestinian Popular Struggle Front
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SCP	Syrian Communist Party
SLA	South Lebanese Army
UAR	United Arab Republic
UECP	Unified Egyptian Communist Party
UN	United Nations
UNLU	Unified National Leadership of the Uprising
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPWC	Union of Palestinian Women's Committees
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WPCP	Workers and Peasants' Communist Party
WYM	Workers' Youth Movement

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Crisis of the Left, Crisis of the Palestinian National Movement

More than seventy years after the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba* and the creation of the State of Israel, as of January 2020 history seems to have rolled back on the question of Palestine. Commenting on US President Trump's announcement of his long-awaited "Vision for Peace", Rashid Khalidi noted that since the 1917 Balfour Declaration:

> the great powers have repeatedly tried to act in spite of the Palestinians, ignoring them, talking for them, or over their heads, or pretending that they did not exist.[1]

Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu stood next to President Trump during the ceremony organised to unveil the US sponsored plan, while no Palestinian representative was invited, consistently with the total US and Israeli neglect of Palestinian voices during preparatory works. As Khalidi and many others observed, this approach reflected the US and Israeli colonial perspectives informing their vision for settling the question of Palestine, one where indigenous views should not be considered. But the absence of Palestinian leaders as well as their feeble response to the publication of the plan also signalled the deep political and representation crisis that the Palestinian national movement has been experiencing since the 2007 Hamas-Fatah division.

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Over the last five years, events in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) underscored the growing distance between the once dominant Palestinian *fasa'il* (factions) and popular mobilisation against the occupation. Throughout most of 2018 and early 2019, thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip joined weekly demonstrations and sit-ins in what became known as the "Great Return Marches" to protest the ongoing Israeli blockade of the Hamas-ruled enclave. Palestinian factions had no direct role in launching the mobilisation which was instead the initiative of civil society organisations. In fact, the creation of an institutionalised coordination committee by the political factions contributed to winding down the marches' momentum.[2]

In this context, Hamas' government in Gaza and the Fatah-controlled Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the West Bank, blocked in their competition for primacy, have proven unable to mobilise Palestinian society effectively on a national level, let alone within the Palestinian diaspora communities. Neither the PNA, as legacy and heir of the national project embodied by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), nor Hamas as its Islamist alternative succeeded in fulfilling the Palestinian long-term goals of self-determination and statehood. Within this impasse, these political entities stopped providing the Palestinian people with a comprehensive and inclusive institutional, political and cultural framework in which to voice, struggle for and pursue their political and social aspirations.

Against the backdrop of this crisis and of Palestinian political polarisation, the absence of an alternative "third way" between the internationally recognised PNA camp and the "radical" Islamist option arises as a central question. The political diversity of the Palestinian national movement points to the study of the Palestinian Left as a first step to investigate and understand the reasons of such absence. The Palestinian Left's legacy of struggle for social and national emancipation, its pioneering mobilisation of labour, women and students as well as its historical contribution in terms of ideological elaboration should provide solid bases upon which establishing an alternative to the current deadlock. Nonetheless, the Palestinian Left appears marginalised and its factions display little influence on the general orientations of the national movement. Looking at the reasons behind the current condition of the Palestinian Left thus means pursuing a clearer understanding of the crisis affecting Palestinian politics nowadays.

The decline of the Palestinian Left cannot be approached without addressing specifically the marginalisation that its main faction, the Popular

Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), experienced throughout more than two decades since the early 1980s. The PFLP was not only the main leftist faction in terms of membership, popular support and international recognition. Within the Palestinian national movement, and specifically the PLO, it also represented the first competitor for Fatah. Its strong emphasis on armed struggle, its strict organisational rules and its Marxist-Leninist, but also Maoist, ideological background earned the PFLP the fame of hard-line, revolutionary force within the national movement. Its image of revolutionary "purity" has been often put in contrast with Fatah's pragmatism, which the PFLP itself frequently denounced as opportunism. Therefore, the PFLP's increasing irrelevance left a representative void within the Palestinian national movement which appears more significant as the Islamist and nationalist-secular options are at a standstill.

The current condition of the PFLP and of the Palestinian Left cannot only be ascribed to single external factors and events that chipped away its political weight. In fact, it is also the result of the conduct of a "loyal opposition" that stopped embodying a counterhegemonic project while the mainstream leadership asserted its vision increasingly uncontested. This left room to the emergence of a new Islamist competitor which in turn, after achieving partial hegemony, exhausted its alternative political capital. The PFLP's conduct must therefore be analysed in historical perspective to comprehend the sources of its political action that ultimately led it to de facto relinquish its counterhegemonic role. Providing a historical account of the PFLP's decline therefore means addressing a major cause behind the Palestinian crisis of legitimacy and political representation. The lack of political and organisational renewal within the Palestinian national movement is tightly linked to the shortcomings of the PFLP and of the whole Palestinian Left.

The account of the PFLP's conduct behind its decline entails a focus on its collective agency conceived as the complex of discourses, priority formulation, positions and decisions that the PFLP adopted to tackle its political crisis. This approach allows to identify a pattern in the PFLP's political agency that challenges static views of the PFLP's marginalisation singling out specific factors and events without defining a relational network. The historical perspective on political agency sheds light on the core factors forging the PFLP's policies, which cannot be neglected in achieving a comprehensive understanding of its decline and of its persistent marginalisation.

The focused study of the PFLP's marginalisation process also opens new perspectives on the historical role of the PLO and its successor the PNA. By investigating their functioning from the PFLP's minority and oppositional perspective, the PLO and the PNA not only emerge as institutional frameworks that embodied a political setting and target for the PFLP's policies. The exploration of the PFLP's marginalisation process allows to evaluate the PLO and the PNA in their double, and to a certain extent paradoxical, function of a constraining yet simultaneously vital framework for the PFLP's agency. This perspective on the PLO and the PNA entails a reassessment of intra-factional relations within umbrella organisations and quasi-state entities. The PFLP's case can thus be considered along the experience of other leftist organisations participating in national liberation movements.

The problem of a leftist organisation acting within the boundaries of an overarching nationalist discourse and platform resonated throughout the post-colonial history of the Middle East and North Africa. The ability to define an autonomous national liberation platform has been key to the success or failure of leftist experiences, that is why, the PFLP and Palestinian leftist trajectories should be read alongside the paths of similar forces acting in different national contexts. Addressing the PFLP's marginalisation by focusing on its conduct means also problematising the issue of leftist decline in the post-Soviet world. The stress on political agency as response to emerging challenges underscores the importance of "individual" aspects characterising single cases. Leftist decline was not a mere by-product of the end of existing socialism but the result of peculiar reaction to such crisis, hence the validity of an analytical approach centred on political agency.

Subjective Factors, Dilemmas and Policy Fluctuations

The history of the PFLP outlined in this book stretches over 25 years, between two of the most fateful events in the history of the Palestinian national movement: the eviction of the PLO from its headquarters in Beirut following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 2007 geographical and political split between Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah-dominated PNA in the West Bank.

In summer 1982, the PLO saw its state-in-exile destroyed and its military capabilities severely reduced at the hands of the Israeli army. In reconsidering its strategy, the PLO leadership relied on its wider international networks and gave priority to diplomatic activity to salvage its achievements and fulfil Palestinian long-term goals. For the PFLP, the loss of Beirut questioned its ability to perform the revolutionary task upon which it was founded and that had been substantially able to fulfil until then. The protection of the "Palestinian revolution" and the participation in the "progressive front" during the Lebanese Civil War provided the framework for such revolutionary performance, while the PFLP contributed to the PLO state-building project. After the relocation in Damascus, the PFLP's autonomy was reduced, while renewed global interest in a political settlement seemed to favour Fatah's new orientations. The counterhegemonic role played within the PLO was thrown into crisis and consequently, the PFLP started to lose constraining power towards Arafat's growing individualism. During the following decades, the PFLP did not regenerate its revolutionary action notwithstanding the evolving political scenarios emerged ever since 1982. The PFLP's conduct during the 2006–07 Hamas-Fatah conflict represented the conclusive step in its declining trajectory. Afterwards, the PFLP remained on the margins of Palestinian politics, while the whole national movement continued to face the impasse stemming from political polarisation and dysfunctional institutions. Such persistent marginalisation signals the perpetuation of problematic aspects in the PFLP's agency which must be the subject of historical analysis.

In addressing, the PFLP's marginalisation within Palestinian politics, the Marxian categories of subjective and objective factors are employed to analyse the PFLP's trajectory.[3] In this case, objective factors consist of external developments and events outside the PFLP's control which are often highlighted as the main causes for its decline. Conversely, subjective factors can be identified with the PFLP's own agency in facing such developments. By prioritising subjective factors, the goal is not to assert their overall predominance over outstanding objective factors. Rather the intention is to problematise the issue of the PFLP's decline by showing the interconnection of objective and subjective factors instead of pointing to an apparent causal relation.

Such focus on the PFLP's agency allows to identify the roots of its problematic response to the challenges emerged during the period under scrutiny. As part of a national liberation movement, the PFLP had always had to balance political competition with the pursuit of strategic goals.

The contestation of Fatah leadership of the PLO thus occurred within the boundaries of a shared platform defined on the bases of nationalist goals and values. Fundamentally, the PFLP's bid for alternative leadership never questioned either its adherence to the common Palestinian platform or the legitimacy of its institutions. The Marxist faction thus pursued an opposition to Fatah which was nonetheless loyal to the principles and rules stemming from integration within the PLO. This produced an "opposition-integration dilemma" that, following the 1982 paradigmatic shifts in Palestinian politics, started to hinder the PFLP's agency. Loyal adherence to the PLO was not only due to the respect of shared values, but also stemmed from practical benefits such as access to funding or international recognition. The loss of the Lebanese sanctuary further exacerbated the PFLP's dependence on institutional integration while the bases of its opposition to Fatah appeared increasingly precarious. The PFLP would continue to seek integration in the hegemonic Palestinian bloc even as the PLO significance declined following the creation of the PNA in 1993–94. This exacerbated the opposition-integration dilemma in light of the stated rejection of the process that established the Palestinian self-governing entity.

The growing difficulty in resolving the opposition-integration dilemma led the PFLP's action to "fluctuate" between contrasting priorities. Between 1982 and 2007, recurring "policy fluctuations" affected the PFLP's political agency undermining the coherence of its action and preventing the achievement of the goals spelled in its agenda. Popularity and credibility were also affected from such negative pattern which can hence be considered as a major cause for the PFLP's gradual, yet irreversible political marginalisation. Inasmuch as it represents a negative pattern, the concept of policy fluctuation adopted herein should not be confused with political flexibility or pragmatism. Pragmatism would imply change in fundamental positions and political agency according to the evolution of the circumstantial conditions. Changes should have a deep scope and be part of a coherent overall political vision. In fact, pragmatism was an essential aspect of the PFLP's political experience being a quality fundamental for non-state actors lacking the assets of statehood.

Conversely, policy fluctuation entails the pursuit of an inconsistent political line in the attempt to address clashing priorities or pressures. The political actor is faced with single or multiple dilemmas and fails to resolve them adequately. From this stems an inconsistent agency that undermines political effectiveness and credibility among the supporting base and contributes to political marginalisation. In fact, fluctuant and pragmatic

responses coexisted in the PFLP's agency during the period addressed, however, policy fluctuations ultimately prevailed over pragmatism.

The opposition-integration dilemma not only exacerbated the policy fluctuation pattern directly, but it also emphasised other contradictions affecting the PFLP and contributing to the inconsistency of its agency. In a context of power centralisation in the hands of one charismatic, internationally recognised leader, namely PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, and of a parallel loss of political weight, the PFLP had to question its adherence to some of its tenets in order to protect its political leverage. The role of armed struggle, the PFLP's idea of Palestinian state and the historical rejection of diplomatic solutions for the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as relations with supposedly hostile and friendly Arab regimes, came into question. Tensions were produced between these underpinning positions and the need for flexibility to ensure integration and consensus within the PLO and, in turn, influence on its policies. Although these tensions had already emerged in previous circumstances, such as with the 1974 PLO adoption of the "Ten-Point Program"[4] for instance, the specific aspects of the post-Beirut phase emphasised their impact on the PFLP itself.

On the Palestinian level, the need to effectively counterbalance Fatah posed the question of relations and alliances with other PLO opposition factions, leftist in particular. Factional priorities thus had to be concealed with different agendas and views on paramount issues such as peace plans, the role of armed struggle, relations with the Arab regimes and degree of opposition to Fatah. The PFLP's hard-line fostered tensions with other leftist forces, undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of "democratic" alliances supposed to face Fatah's "deviation" from national values and goals. Differently, when the PFLP attempted association with Palestinian Islamists following the 1993 Oslo accords, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad's unrecognition of the PLO status compromised mutual relations. In fact, Islamist rejection of traditional Palestinian consensus on the PLO had a greater weight than ideological divergences in preventing an effective collaboration.

The opposition-integration dilemma also impacted the PFLP's regional relations, particularly during the 1980s and specifically in the case of Syria. Damascus and the PFLP apparently espoused the same "steadfast" line in resisting political settlements of the conflict, but the Syrian regime's will to assert control over the PLO clashed with the PFLP's respect of Palestinian autonomy.

Policy fluctuations stemming from the opposition-integration dilemma also affected the PFLP in its internal dynamics, fuelling existing tensions within the organisation. As the centre of the Palestinian national movement relocated to the OPT with the outbreak of the First Intifada (1987–1993), all PLO factions with a significant presence there were faced with the emergence of local leaderships. The different conditions that the national movement in the OPT and the exiled PLO experienced in the previous two decades had significant political and organisational repercussions. The "inside" national movement developed a less hierarchical leadership, resorted historically to non-violent mobilisation rather than armed struggle and prioritised the end of the occupation over total liberation. State-building in the "outside" accentuated a vertical structuring of political mobilisation as PLO institutions were gradually bureaucratised to perform state-like tasks. These and other factors, such as the prominence enjoyed by the national movement in the OPT following the uprising, fostered the emergence of an "inside-outside" divide which did not exempt the PFLP.[5] Although the OPT branches recognised the leadership of the exiled cadres, their rise to prominence represented a potential challenge to power balances both on the factional and the PLO levels.

Since 1987, the PFLP's own inside-outside divide consistently interacted with the underlaying opposition-integration dilemma on several aspects, further complicating policymaking. For instance, during the First Intifada the exiled leadership, eager to maintain its grip on the organisation while ensuring participation in the PLO institutions, would clash with its inside branch willing to pursue a tougher line towards Fatah's diplomatic strategy. Conversely, in the post-Oslo phase, differences emerged on the position towards the PNA institutions, as the inside displayed its readiness to engage the new polity, free of the outside's ideological and historical bond to the PLO status. As a result, the PFLP's policy fluctuations were emphasised while its strength as an opposition force and its overall stance within a changing political environment resulted undermined, favouring the declining trend.

Ultimately, the opposition-integration dilemma was the manifestation of a conundrum common to many leftist organisations participating in national liberation movements. Such dilemma originated from the fundamental problem of formulating an effective radical and counterhegemonic case for national liberation, capable of mobilising consensus, confronting competing forces and facing paradigmatic changes. In the PFLP's case, the opposition-integration dilemma also echoed the post-colonial dilemma

that Frantz Fanon had identified in the relations between the "national bourgeoisie" and the "revolutionary masses", or the need to transform national consciousness into social and political consciousness.[6] The PLO quasi-state provided the conditions for the appearance of this dilemma of which the contrasting priorities of opposition and integration are an expression. Keeping these considerations in mind, the PFLP's trajectory and dilemmas can be juxtaposed to those of other leftist forces committed to national liberation that have either achieved this goal or are still fighting for its realisation. That is why this book also discusses the ideas and dynamics illustrated departing from the PFLP's case, considering differences and similarities in the paths of the Egyptian communist movement and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

State of the Literature

Of all the academic efforts made to compile, analyse and understand the history of the contemporary Palestinian national movement, only a little part focused specifically on the PFLP or the Palestinian Left. The Palestinian mainstream, namely Fatah leadership of both the PLO and the PNA, as well as Palestinian political Islam have received a much wider attention. Ironically, this is to a certain extent yet another manifestation of the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma, as its unquestioned adherence to the PLO led observers to overlook its leftist trend.

In a 1987 article on the PFLP's decision-making process, As'ad AbuKhalil talked of fluctuations and shifts in policy orientations as a result of both internal dynamics and external pressures.[7] The concept of policy fluctuation drawn from AbuKhalil analysis allowed to backtrack from this "symptom" and identify its roots in the fundamental crisis of the PFLP's revolutionary option after 1982. Starting from this point, the set of contradictions generating policy fluctuations is expanded as both long-standing and new factors interplayed in influencing the PFLP's agency.

Thanks to its focus on the subjective factors, this book engages and challenges the literature addressing the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's decline, providing both a critical account of this process and a new perspective on its chronology. Single reasons behind leftist marginalisation, such as the collapse of existing socialism and the rise of political Islam or the lack of ideological renewal and the negligence towards social issues, are not simply singled out.[8] In fact, they are described as the indication of a deeper dynamic impacting negatively the PFLP and that dated earlier to

the emergence of specific problematic aspects. From this stem a new chronology of the crisis of the Palestinian Left which sees the early 1990s shocking developments as landmarks rather than starting points of a marginalisation process that was already in place. Likewise, the returning argument according to which doctrinal rigidity alienated the PFLP from popular support and made the organisation unfit to face historical shifts is also contested.[9] On the contrary, the PFLP more often resorted to Marxist-Leninist, Maoist ideological and organisational principles to handle both pragmatic changes and policy fluctuations. It was rather the "conservative" use of Marxist analytical criteria and organisational rules that prevented the PFLP from continuing to embody the radical option within the national movement, enabling other actors to attract consensus around their alternative.

The development of a focused analytical approach on the PFLP's agency and of its related concepts paves the way to fresh looks at intra-Palestinian relations. Thus, for instance, the dynamics of the PFLP's opposition to the PLO mainstream, which are tangentially addressed in seminal works on the history of the Palestinian national movement, are thoroughly treated. The identification of the opposition-integration dilemma provides new perspectives on the PLO and its significance for opposition forces. While the existing literature often highlights the constraints that the PLO platform posed to Arafat's agenda, adherence to the PLO erected major obstacles also for the PFLP. In the context of post-Oslo politics, the theme of opposition and integration in Palestinian institutions provides a theoretical framework to assess the PFLP's ambiguous relations with the PNA. Such framework works as analytical link for two different historical phases, equipping the assessment of the PFLP's decline with a fundamental historical scope.[10] Furthermore, it represents an underlying perspective to discuss specific problematic aspects of the PFLP's agency such as its orientations towards civil society and NGOs.[11]

Covering the trajectory of the PFLP in its declining phase also enables a reassessment of Islamist-Leftist relations within the Palestinian national movement. The significant literature on Hamas and the Islamic Jihad touched limitedly on their relations with the PFLP and the Palestinian Left, stressing on ideological distance as representing the main divide between the two trends.[12] However, understanding the fundamental sources of the PFLP's agency allows to analyse the feud beyond ideology and identify in its adherence to the PLO framework the main obstacle to collaboration with the Islamist forces. From this perspective, Hamas'

challenge to the PLO primacy and its assertion as new radical opposition can be appraised in its significance to the PFLP's marginalisation process.

Relying on its case study of the PFLP, and on its echoes with other leftist forces in the region, this book ultimately contributes to the renewed interest in the political and intellectual history of the Arab Left. Recent works based on multidisciplinary approaches and a variety of sources engaged with the reassessment of leftist trajectories in the Arab world. In spite of different geographies and chronologies, such new perspectives seek to illustrate the roots of and the dynamics that brought the Arab Left to crisis and irreversible marginalisation.[13] Far from being an exclusively Palestinian problem, the lack of a revolutionary option confronting the increasingly delegitimised nationalist and Islamist camps emerges as a critical feature uniting the Middle East and North Africa. In such transformative times for the region, reassessing the history of Arab revolutionary forces thus appears more urgent than ever.

Note on Sources

Since their foundations, all PLO factions have been producing and circulating a wide range of publications to assert and promote their views among militants and the Palestinian public. In particular, each organisation relied on at least one official mouthpiece, often in the form of weekly or monthly magazines. As a result, the statements, columns, interviews and opinion pieces published in these magazines provide the best sources to track the evolution of Palestinian politics and debates across history.

The main source of official publications for this book was the magazine *Al-Hadaf*, founded in 1969 by prominent Palestinian author and PFLP member Ghassan Kanafani as the official party mouthpiece. Started as a weekly publication, *Al-Hadaf* became a monthly magazine in 1995 and today is occasionally circulated in its electronic version while a PFLP-linked online platform exists under this name. Besides statements issued by the PFLP's governing bodies, such as the Politburo, Central Committee and Congress, *Al-Hadaf* reported declarations and interviews by the PFLP leaders and its editorial board has been consistently composed of top cadres holding posts within the PFLP and the PLO institutions. This kind of contents, as well as the presence of interviews and articles by other leading figures of the Palestinian national movement, provide detailed insights into the evolution of the PFLP's line and the development of relations with both national, regional and international forces.

The selection of *Al-Hadaf*'s numbers issued between 1982 and 2013 employed for this study has been retrieved at the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut. Further PFLP documents, such as booklets, pamphlets or compiled volumes of official publications, have been obtained from various physical and virtual repositories, such as the library of the Beirut *Institut Français du Proche Orient* or PFLP-affiliated webpages.[14]

Besides the PFLP's official literature, this study also relied on documents issued by the political platforms in which the PFLP participated, first and foremost the PLO, as well as those of other Palestinian factions. This set of material was retrieved mainly from the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and specifically from its dedicated section on primary sources, *Documents and Source Material*. The Palestinian News and Info Agency-Wafa, today the PNA official press agency, also provided valuable archival resources on Palestinian institutions and factions.

Besides textual primary sources, this research also relied on interviews with current and former PFLP members and cadres, as well as with individuals with other political affiliations within the national movement. Oral sources have been consulted to gain insights on the PFLP's internal dynamics and on different orientations across different countries and generations. Interviews were thus conducted in Beirut, both in Palestinian refugee camps and in the offices of civil society organisations or study centres. Other conversations were held in the West Bank and mostly in Ramallah and the Deheishe refugee camp near Bethlehem. Further interviews were conducted in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The reliance on textual material entailed the definition of the appropriate method to best extract the desired information. To this end, the PFLP's literature has been approached following both diachronic and synchronic criteria. The extensive, diachronic reading of official documents over the timespan covered allowed to reconstruct the evolution of the PFLP's policy line and discourse, while identifying the recurring elements marking its political agency. This approach enabled the verification and detection of the PFLP's policy fluctuation through the comparison of the different positions adopted on sensitive issues. The diachronic reading of the PFLP's literature was combined with the synchronic reading of contemporary primary and secondary sources. More precisely, the information provided by the official documents was assessed against the background of both non-PFLP official documents and of the overall historiography on the Palestinian national movement. Such background was fundamental in putting the PFLP's agency, discourse and propaganda in

historical, spatial and political perspective. On the one hand this approach underscored the PFLP's interpretation of the main issues at stake for itself and the whole national movement. On the other, it also highlighted the PFLP's use of rhetoric, and more importantly, its inconsistencies dictated by multiple sources of pressure and dilemmas.

Oral sources were valuable in filling some of the gaps that textual sources left and in helping to test and evaluate the conclusions drawn from the documents. The information obtained from interviews has been cross-referenced with the available official literature. For instance, when approaching possible changes within the PFLP leadership and the rise to prominence of a given leader, the comments obtained from interviewees have been cross-checked with the "presence" of the given leader on the PFLP's official press. Interviews were run following a "semi-structured" model, implying that "key themes of the interview were previously identified and successively formulated as key questions".[15] Strict adherence to the interview plan was avoided as a flexible approach ensured more familiarity with the interviewee who in turn was more likely to disclose the desired details. Ultimately, an interviewee plan was mainly needed to avoid excessive deviations in the conversation track as this risk emerged particularly with current PFLP members who tend to reproduce party narrative and evade sensitive issues.

Outline of the Book

Chapters 2 and 3 address the years between late 1982 up to late 1987 during which the PLO experienced its first major internal split. Chapter 2 focuses on the PFLP's agenda towards the PLO internal situation and on its attempts to build a "radical" alternative to Arafat's diplomatic strategy. At the Palestinian level, this alternative was based on the attempts to establish a leftist, nationalist front opposed to US sponsored peace plans. In its regional and international dimensions, as Chap. 3 shows, this line led the PFLP to seek closer relation with Syria and the USSR. In the attempt to implement this agenda, the PFLP demonstrated itself unable to conciliate the contradictory elements of its political agency. Consequently, the PFLP's line fluctuated between the rejection of Arafat's diplomatic strategy, the need to protect Palestinian autonomy from Syrian pressures and the fragmentation within the Palestinian Left. The PFLP's minor role in the ultimate failure of Arafat's strategy in 1987, along with its inability to

limit his growing power within the PLO, marked a first major step in the PFLP's marginalisation.

Chapter 4 covers the first half of the First Intifada which started in December 1987 as well as the preceding entrenchment of the PLO factions in the OPT. The different political balance existing among Palestinian factions in the OPT as well as the recovered PLO unity offered a valuable chance to renew the PFLP's action within Palestinian politics. However, several sources of pressure returned to haunt the PFLP, so that despite a certain positive pragmatism, it ultimately continued to swing between clashing thrusts. The opposition to Fatah's "concessions" in its diplomatic strategy and the concern for the maintenance of PLO unity, the emergence of the inside-outside divide and the rise to prominence of the Islamist "radical" alternative were the main sources of pressure behind the PFLP's fluctuations during this phase.

Chapter 5 examines the decade that saw the beginning of the peace process era. In particular, it addresses the PFLP's response to the 1993 Oslo accords and the implementation of the PNA's state-building process. In doing so, this chapter outlines the PFLP's shift from total rejection to acceptance of the post-Oslo political regime. Focusing on most of the 1990s, this chapter also deals with the PFLP's reaction to fateful events, from the 1991 Gulf War to the Soviet collapse. Coalition politics, tensions with other opposition factions and the inescapable push to institutional integration emerged as the main factors affecting the PFLP's line of action. In its account of the contradictions stemming from the PFLP's political orientations, Chap. 5 ultimately addresses the failure of its agenda and the ensuing efforts to reconcile with Fatah.

Chapter 6 tackles the years that asserted the PFLP's marginalisation through the unfolding of the 2000–05 Al-Aqsa Intifada and the evolution of the Hamas-Fatah split between 2006 and 2007. In covering the Al-Aqsa Intifada, this chapter outlines the PFLP's fluctuations and loss of relevance in relation to the dynamics marking the second Palestinian mass uprising, such as militarisation, Palestinian political fragmentation and growing Fatah-Hamas polarisation. The final part of this chapter approaches the PFLP's efforts to integrate the post-Intifada and, more significantly, the post-Arafat political scenario. In this phase, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to resurface as the PFLP continued to oscillate between the two sides of the Hamas-Fatah conflict. The ultimate alignment with the PNA demonstrated the prominence of integration within

the traditional hegemonic bloc, highlighting the PFLP's inability to disengage from a dysfunctional political framework.

Chapter 7 provides some analytical and theoretical considerations through the juxtaposition of the PFLP's trajectory to those of the Egyptian communist movement and the PKK. The goal is to examine similarities and differences in the management of shared conundrums, such as the relations with hegemonic nationalist allies or the elaboration of a genuine Marxist conception of national liberation. The study of the Egyptian case underscores how the renounce to formulate and embody a counterhegemonic platform to Nasser's dominant pan-Arab nationalism contributed to the communists' demise. Consequent to this renounce was the emergence of a fluctuating conduct that echoed the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma. Conversely, the examination of the PKK's evolution highlights the adherence to a radical, revolutionary agenda as a crucial drive for survival and renewal. Paradigmatic changes in the PKK continued to serve its own interpretation of national liberation and societal transformation. This allowed the movement to resist competition within the Kurdish national movement and continue to mobilise popular support for its revolutionary platform.

The PFLP's Ideological and Organisational Background

The PFLP was officially founded on 11 December 1967, at the initiative of George Habash, a Palestinian physician hailing from Lydda, and other Palestinian and Arab activists mostly based in Lebanon. The great majority of the PFLP's leaders had been active within the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM), a Pan-Arab, transnational organisation that Habash himself helped to found in the early 1950s. Between the 1950s and the late 1960s, the ANM went through different phases marked by different ideological orientations. Upon foundation the ANM experienced a first Arab nationalist phase, in which the influence of pan-Arab intellectuals such as Michel Aflaq and Constantin Zureiq was predominant. Subsequently, Nasser's rise as symbol of pan-Arabism prompted the movement to move closer to his interpretation of Arab nationalism. Despite significant divisions, the ANM shifted towards the adoption of Arab socialism, marking a significant move towards the Left of the political spectrum. The 1967 Arab defeat in the June War against Israel compromised the

credibility and popularity of Nasser's Arab nationalism and sparked intense debate within the ANM. The voices advocating for the adoption of armed struggle and in favour of a shift to Marxism grew in strength, while the idea of prioritising organisation on a national basis rather than a pan-Arab one became more popular.[16] On these premises, the PFLP was created only few months after the major shocks of the 1967 war.

The PFLP resulted from the merger of several organisations linked to the ANM, such as the National Front for the Liberation of Palestinian (NFLP), with previously autonomous factions such as the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF).[17] In this same period, the Palestinian armed organisations rose to prominence within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional politics. Drawing from the experiences of national liberation movements worldwide, such as the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* or the resistance movement in south Vietnam, the Palestinian organisations, first and foremost Fatah, resorted to guerrilla warfare as the main mean to confront the Israeli enemy. After almost two decades since the 1948 *Nakba*, independent Palestinian action rose at the forefront of the effort to liberate Palestine, in response to the failure of Arab nationalist regimes.[18]

In this contest, Palestinian armed organisations, and notably Fatah, started to aim at taking over the PLO. The PLO was established in 1964 following an Arab summit summoned in Cairo at the initiative of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Supposedly, the PLO had to work as a framework to mobilise the Palestinian population while keeping the growing Palestinian national movement under Arab control. However, the Arab setback in the June 1967 war, while shattering the credibility of joint Arab action, paved the way to the rise of independent Palestinian action. Moreover, the success of Palestinian guerrillas in inflicting significant damage and losses on the Israeli army, best exemplified by the iconic battle of Karameh of March 1968, galvanised popular support for the armed organisations which saw the number of their recruits increasing exponentially. Consequently, Fatah and the other factions managed first to earn PLO recognition during the 4th Palestine National Council (PNC) in July 1968. Finally, their takeover was officially sanctioned during the 5th session of the PNC in February 1969 during which Fatah asserted its control over the majority required to elect Yasser Arafat as new Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee.[19]

The PFLP adopted Marxism-Leninism as official political doctrine in 1969 during its Second National Congress, in what represented the final

step of the ANM's transition from 1950s right-wing nationalism towards the radical left.[20] In terms of political and military doctrine, the PFLP took inspiration from different experiences of global Marxism that were adapted to the nationalist character of the Palestinian struggle. In accordance with Leninist principles, the PFLP saw itself as the "vanguard of the working class" supposed to "mobilise and prepare" the Palestinian masses to play their "historical role in self and national liberation".[21] "Democratic centralism" regulated party discipline and relations between the different bodies of the PFLP. The National Congress was the highest body within the PFLP, charged with defining the official line and electing members to the main leading institutions. The Central Committee, a smaller body, was to decide the party line between each session of the National Congress. In turn, the Political Bureau (Politburo) and the Central Leadership, particularly the Secretary-General, fulfilled this role when the Central Committee was not convened.[22]

The adoption of "revolutionary violence" and in particular of guerrilla warfare as the main tool of Palestinian liberation reflected the influence that anti-imperialist revolutionaries such as Frantz Fanon and Ernesto Che Guevara had had on the PFLP and on the whole Palestinian national movement in the late 1960s. For the PFLP, guerrilla warfare was the appropriate tool to lead a long-term struggle capable of exhausting the enemy both psychologically, shattering Israel's goal of delivering security to its citizens, and economically, forcing it to adopt costly defence measures to counter the Palestinian fighters' trans-border attacks. Moreover, this military strategy also allowed the PFLP to mobilise the Palestinian masses and educate them in the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, thus realising the necessary preconditions for a mass-based popular war.[23]

The influence of Maoism emerged with full clarity in the PFLP's analysis of the political environments in which it acted. The PFLP adopted Mao's concepts of "primary and secondary" contradictions to determine the priorities of its fight. For instance, when the "Palestinian revolution" was launched in late 1960s, the effort for national liberation required prioritising the primary contradiction with Israel rather than class contradictions within the Palestinian fold.[24] Maoism was at the base of the PFLP's view of world politics and its actors divided into the "friends and enemies camps" on the national, regional and international levels. Therefore, the Palestinian revolution was first of all a struggle for national liberation but at the same time, it was also part of a regional struggle against "reactionary regimes", such as the Gulf monarchies or Jordan, which colluded with

"international imperialism", mainly identified with the United States, the ultimate enemy on the global scale. By the same token, fellow Palestinian organisations were the PFLP's allies on the national level while nationalist regimes such as Nasserist Egypt and Baathist Iraq were partners in the Middle Eastern region. Finally, the PFLP saw the Palestinian revolution as part of the global struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism, an assumption that justified the pursuit of friendly relations with the USSR and the Socialist Bloc countries, the main sponsors of global national liberation movements, as well as with those movements themselves.[25]

The global dimension of the struggle for liberation took tangible form with the famous "external operations" that the PFLP carried out in various parts of the world between 1968 and the first half of the 1970s.[26] The PFLP acquired global fame for its aircraft hijackings, notably those carried out for the first time by a female operative, Leila Khaled, who became a symbol of the global anti-imperialist struggle. These operations also included collaboration with Marxist armed groups all over the world such as the Red Japanese Army, whose fighters received training in the PFLP's military camps and carried out attacks on its behalf, such as the one at the Lod airport on 30 May 1972.[27] The concept underpinning this kind of attack was that "geography did not matter much in the total war against imperialism". In the PFLP's view, the emergence of the Palestinian cause resulted from the action of global actors such as imperial Britain, world Zionism and the United States justifying the strike of "imperialist interests" all over the world.[28]

The nationalist, Pan-Arab origins of the PFLP were clear at its foundation, especially in its views concerning the form of the future state to be established after the defeat of Zionism. The PFLP participated in the late 1960s Palestinian debate supporting the idea of creating a socialist state all over the Arab Levant. This vision of a unified Arab entity coupled with ideas borrowed from the experience of the Vietnamese resistance against US aggression. The PFLP called for the establishment of a socialist regime in the countries surrounding Palestine capable of lending their support to the Palestinian people's war against Israel. The "Arab Hanoi" was soon identified with the Jordanian capital Amman, as the Hashemite Kingdom had become between the late 1960s and early 1970s the base of the Palestinian armed organisations and launchpad of attacks against Israel.[29] The PFLP's aim of reversing the Jordanian monarchy was best expressed by the famous motto attributed to George Habash: "the road to Jerusalem passes through Amman".[30]

The PFLP Before 1982: Rivalry with Fatah and Leftist Fragmentation

Competition and opposition to Fatah marked the PFLP's policies since its very first years, producing significant tensions due to common participation in the PLO. At the same time, centrifugal dynamics also immediately affected the PFLP's internal life, undermining its organisational cohesion and its bid for primacy within the Palestinian national movement.

In its early years, the PFLP suffered several splits which led to the creation of splinter organisations. The fractures developed along the lines of the PFLP's internal trends and followed the disputes between the "rightist" leadership and the "leftist" opposition and between the ANM and the PLF groups. The first secession occurred in 1968, when Ahmad Jibril, a former military officer in the Syrian army and head of the PLF, decided to break away from the PFLP to establish the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PF-GC). The group seceded mainly to retain control over the former PLF personnel and infrastructure but also because of its interest in prioritising military action over ideological disputes to which the PFLP lent higher importance. This feud reflected the role of geographical scattering and personal political courses within the Palestinian national movement. The PF-GC's military focus was linked to its leaders' experience within the ranks of the Syrian army. Conversely, the Habash-led ANM group came to political maturity in the context of student political activism in Beirut, where ideological orientations had a greater role in forging their political consciousness.[31] Besides this, the PF-GC's formation also underscored the influence of regional actors on the Palestinian national movement, as the Syrian regime guaranteed its sponsorship to the newly formed Palestinian faction. Damascus aimed at expanding its influence over the PLO and found in Jibril's group a partner suitable for such a goal. For its part, the PF-GC would hardly have been an effective political actor within the national movement without direct Syrian patronage.[32]

In 1969, another split led to the creation of the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, later renamed Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The establishment of the DFLP was the final act in the dispute between the PFLP's rightist mainstream, headed by Habash, and its leftist minority gathered around Nayef Hawatmeh, a Jordanian-born leader of the ANM. Hawatmeh and his comrades criticised the PFLP leadership for its authoritarian drift as well as for its

excessive military caution. Moreover, the PFLP's left was composed of younger cadres who were closer to Maoist, but also Trotskyist, principles, giving to the dispute both a generational and an ideological dimension. More significantly, the split reflected an internal power struggle: in the months leading to the formal separation, the rightist leadership replaced the leftists in key command posts while the leftists themselves publicly attacked their rivals thanks to their control of *Al-Hourriah*, the PFLP's mouthpiece at the time. Ultimately, Hawatmeh's group took advantage of Habash's temporary detention by the Syrian authorities and of Fatah's military protection to effectively secede from the PFLP in February 1969.

Beyond internal disputes, the establishment of the DFLP, but also that of the PF-GC, reflected the weight of personality leadership in Palestinian politics. Both the splinter groups were formed around a leading figure and in the DFLP's case particularly, in contrast with Habash's authoritative and authoritarian leadership. Moreover, the DFLP's split embodied an early example of Arafat's ability to play on the divisions within his rival groups in order to strengthen his position within the national movement. Fatah's military support appeared essential for the PFLP's splintering left-wing due to its smaller numbers as well as the potential crackdown that could come from Habash's loyalists.[33] This pattern of action would emerge repeatedly in the policies of the PLO Chairman deeply affecting the whole PLO and Fatah itself.

The rivalry with Fatah consistently marked the PFLP's presence within the PLO as the two factions held opposed views on crucial issues. Fatah[34] was founded between 1958 and 1959 by a group of Palestinian activists employed in the Gulf countries who had previously concluded their studies in Egypt, such as Yasser Arafat, Khalil al-Wazir and Mahmud Abbas. Fatah's specificity was its focus on armed struggle as the principal mean to mobilise Palestinian refugees all over the Arab world to achieve the goal of liberation. In addition, Fatah stressed the importance of Palestinian autonomy from Arab governments as well as prioritising the pursuit of independent Palestinian institutions, thus anticipating the centrality of the search for statehood in its political agency.[35]

Since the takeover of the PLO by the armed organisations in late 1960s, Fatah has retained political and military supremacy over the whole Palestinian national movement, at least until the gradual rise to prominence of the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. The PFLP, for its part, asserted its place as second force after Fatah but was never able to close the gap with Arafat's movement. The mutual acceptance of the overarching

Palestinian nationalist paradigm allowed Fatah and the PFLP to consistently settle their difference politically. This was constantly the case from the early disputes on the allocation of factional seats within the PLO bodies in 1969–70 up to the feud that divided the Palestinian factions in the mid-1980s. In that sense, a key role was played by both factions' strict adherence to the protection of Palestinian political independence, of the PLO as the paramount framework for it and to the "consensus principle" that ruled relations among Palestinian organisations at least until the mid-1980s.[36] From the PFLP's perspective, this common ground with Fatah represented an instrument to constrain and influence the agenda of the leading Palestinian faction. At the same time, it produced a tension between its bid for radical opposition and the limits stemming from its participation and adherence to the PLO top institutions.

Fatah's primacy was based on the far larger popular support it enjoyed among Palestinian masses compared to any other organisation. During the crucial period in the wake of the 1967 war, Fatah attracted large numbers of recruits by virtue of its undisputed focus on armed struggle and its inclusive, loose Palestinian nationalism. By mid-1968 Fatah fielded 2000 fighters in Jordan, out of a total of 3000 from all other factions while the PFLP reached between 1000 and 1500 armed men only by 1970.[37] According to other estimates, by 1969 the joint forces of Fatah and the PFLP totalled 30,000 to 50,000 fighters, both professionals and voluntary reservists, of whom the overwhelming majority belonged to Fatah.[38]

When the Palestinian armed factions took over the PLO during the 5th session of the PNC in February 1969, seats in PLO institutions were assigned following quotas that reflected Fatah's popular primacy. Indeed, Fatah managed to secure 33 seats out of 105 within the PNC itself while the PFLP was assigned only 12. Similarly, Yasser Arafat was elected PLO Executive Committee Chairman and Fatah obtained other three seats in the PLO executive branch, while the PFLP like other armed factions gained just one seat.[39] Furthermore, Arafat strengthened his authority over the PLO thanks to the support he enjoyed among independent members who assured their backing of his line in critical phases throughout his decades-long tenure as PLO Chairman.[40]

In terms of differences, the ideological background was a paramount aspect dividing Fatah and the PFLP. Arafat's movement did not rely on a proper ideological setting, a feature that fostered its wide popular appeal. Relying on an inclusive, non-ideological Palestinian nationalism Fatah built working relations with both the nationalist Arab republics and the

conservative monarchies of the region. Conversely, the PFLP's adherence to Marxism-Leninism required an ideologically homogeneous membership, while its view of world politics excluded, at least initially, relations with reactionary regimes.[41] Fatah's loose ideology and its focus on Palestine also contributed to the successful establishment of relations on the international level. While the PFLP's radical, anti-imperialist discourse and its associations with international armed organisations discouraged massive support from major powers, Fatah found in China an early military supplier in 1965.[42] Similarly, in 1973 Fatah became the USSR's first Palestinian partner, not only by virtue of its dominant position within the PLO, but also due to its positive stand concerning political settlement plans for the Arab-Israeli conflict.[43]

Fatah supported non-interference in Arab affairs while the PFLP gradually escalated between 1968 and 1970 its calls for the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan. Indeed, while the PFLP, and the DFLP, actively sought a showdown with the Jordanian authorities, Fatah appeared more hesitant concerning an open military confrontation. Ultimately, the PFLP's rhetoric over the "duality of power" in Jordan contributed to the ignition of tensions between the armed organisations and the Jordanian government, playing a significant role in King Hussein's decision to evict militarily the PLO from his country's soil in September 1970.[44]

Fatah and the PFLP also displayed conflicting views over the means to achieve Palestinian national rights. After the eviction from Jordan and the relocation of the PLO to Lebanon, Fatah's leadership aimed at strengthening the Palestinian quasi-state infrastructure there while exploring the possibilities to pursue Palestinian statehood through diplomatic means. The diplomatic turn emerged with full clarity in 1974, when the PLO adopted a "Ten-Point Program" during the 12th session of the PNC that called for the establishment of a Palestinian national authority "on any part of liberated land", in a first Palestinian recognition of a two-state solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict.[45] That same year, the PLO, under Arafat's Chairmanship, gained international recognition mainly through the Arab League's decision to recognise it as the "sole, legitimate, representative of the Palestinian people" and the invitation that the United Nations (UN) General Assembly extended to Arafat, granting the PLO the "non-member observer status".[46] The PFLP for its part refused to relinquish the long-term goal of total liberation and formed alongside other Palestinian factions the "Rejectionist Front" to oppose the PLO leaderships' "moderation", while suspended its PLO Executive Committee

membership to protest the new line. The PFLP believed that the shift towards diplomacy represented a "deviation" from the "correct, revolutionary and nationalist line" as stated in the Palestinian National Charter, the PLO constitutive document. Such deviation could lead, according to its view, to the "liquidation of the Palestinian revolution". Specifically, what the PFLP rejected was the PLO leadership's support for an international peace conference based on UN Security Council Resolution 242, issued in the wake of the 1967 war and reinforced by resolution 338 that put an end to the 1973 Arab-Israeli confrontation.[47]

Nonetheless, the PLO factions headed gradually towards reconciliation after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Between 1975 and 1982, the PLO factions cemented their cohesion in the face of external threats, both military and political. This drove the PFLP to rejoin the PLO institutions fully, as its representative was back at the Executive Committee since 1978 while official reconciliation was achieved during the 15th PNC session in 1981. Besides formally asserting reconciliation within the PLO, this PNC session also signalled the PFLP's de facto acceptance of the PLO interim programme, as the final resolutions restated PLO adherence to the programme approved in the previous PNC sessions.[48] Although the shared interest in protecting the PLO role militarily and politically constituted solid ground for unity, the reconciliation process underlined the PFLP's tension between opposing Fatah's agenda and its commitment to the protection of the PLO. This phase ultimately represented the first occasion on which the PFLP compromised over its oppositional role for the sake of PLO unity and defence.

In the context of the Lebanese crisis, the factions came together around the protection of the PLO "state-within-the-state". The danger derived not only from Israeli retaliatory air-raids on Palestinian bases in South Lebanon, but also from Lebanese conservative and far-right forces that saw in the Palestinian national movement a threat to the Lebanese political status quo. This perception was reinforced by the relations between the Lebanese Left and the Palestinian armed factions. In fact, since the PLO relocation to Lebanon, Fatah pursued non-interference in Lebanese affairs as well as good relations with all Lebanese political forces. However, the PFLP and the DFLP called for tighter links with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), the coalition gathering all Lebanese progressive forces. As the conflict exploded in spring-summer 1975, the PLO leadership too gradually decided to take an active part in the hostilities alongside the LNM to protect its base in Lebanon as well as to exploit the conflict

and acquire greater diplomatic weight on the regional and international stages. The intervention of Syrian forces in spring 1976, to the detriment of the PLO, finally convinced Fatah that the PLO could not avoid full military involvement in the crisis as the conflict started to acquire regional and international dimensions.[49] A further threat to the PLO status in Lebanon came from Israeli involvement in Lebanon which increasingly sought to weaken and ultimately destroy the PLO infrastructure in the country. The first invasion in 1978 and the creation of the Israeli-proxy faction, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), both followed this logic.

Politically, the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel signed under US tutelage at Camp David embodied a shared danger for the whole PLO. The bilateral nature of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty was at odds with the PLO leadership goal of participating in a multilateral peace conference to settle the conflict. Moreover, the vague reference to the establishment of a "self-governing authority" in the OPT prior to any Israeli withdrawal represented a threat to the PLO status of sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.[50] The PLO leadership's rejection of the Camp David treaty resonated with the PFLP's overall opposition to negotiations and recognition of Israel. According to its analysis, the peace treaty aimed at paving the way to normalisation between Israel and the Arab states. This not only entailed the "liquidation" of the Palestinian cause, but also implied a strengthening of "reactionary forces" which would benefit economically and politically from normalised relations with Israel and from US dominance in the region.[51]

With recovered unity, the PLO finally faced in 1982 the greatest threat to its survival until then. On 6 June, the Israeli army launched operation "Peace in Galilee" and started its second invasion of Lebanon. After reaching Beirut in nine days, the Israelis laid siege to the Lebanese capital, heavily shelling the western part of Beirut for over two months. Finally, the PLO agreed to evacuate the city in late August, completing the withdrawal of its forces by early September. With its second, and far greater, invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Israel finally met its objective of putting an end to the PLO quasi-state in Lebanon, opening a new phase in the Palestinian struggle for liberation and self-determination.[52]

Notes

1. Rashid Khalidi, 'No Deal: Why Trump's Plan for Palestine Will Only Create More Conflict', *The Guardian*, 20 January 2020, accessed February 19, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/30/no-deal-why-trumps-plan-for-palestine-will-only-create-more-conflict.
2. Thabit al-ʿAmur, 'Musirat al-ʿAwda. Min Fikra Shababiyya ila Hayʾa Fasaʾiliyya (The Marches of Return. From an Idea of the Youth to a Structure of the Factions)', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 23 March 2019, accessed February 19, 2020, https://bit.ly/2SUL0oA.
3. Such categories recur in Palestinian critical literature, for instance in Jamil Hilal, *Al-Yasar al-Filastini. Ila ʾAyna? (The Palestinian Left. Where To?)* (Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2009).
4. For the first time the PLO hinted to the possibility of a two-state solution by declaring the will to establish a temporary self-governing entity on all parts of liberated land.
5. For more details on this see Jamil Hilal, 'PLO Institutions: The Challenge Ahead', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 1 (1993): 46–60.
6. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de La Terre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 143–93.
7. As'ad AbuKhalil, 'Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation', *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 361–78.
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9. Ali Jarbawi, 'Palestinian Politics at a Crossroads', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 4 (1996): 29–39; Harold M. Cubert, *The PFLP's Changing Role in the Middle East* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).
10. Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the*

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CHAPTER 2

Out of Beirut: Years of Split

Introduction

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon not only posed an existential threat to the PLO, but also brought about an "existential crisis" for all the Palestinian factions. After the loss of their Lebanese sanctuary, the Palestinian armed organisations had to rethink both the material and political bases of their action for the upcoming years. Not all factions however were equally equipped, a difference that appeared clear since the very aftermath of the invasion. The different orientations that the PLO leadership and single factional leaders favoured to take on the post-Beirut phase set the stage for a five-year long period of split and internecine fight.

PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat started to prioritise his diplomatic activity to achieve Palestinian statehood, a task that would remain his main goal until early 1987. Arafat aimed at coordinating with Jordan and renewing relations with Egypt, thus earning a spot in the US settlement plan for the region. Such scenario was unacceptable for the PFLP, to whom conservative Arab governments and the United States were long-standing adversaries. Therefore, throughout the mid-1980s the PFLP's goal was to create a "radical alternative" to the agenda of the PLO leadership. In the attempt to fulfil this task, the PFLP strived repeatedly to create an opposition coalition to unite the Palestinian Left and challenge the "nationalist" legitimacy of the PLO leadership. However, in challenging Fatah, the PFLP never questioned its adherence to the PLO framework and the primacy of its institutions, thus qualifying its agency as a "loyal opposition".

F. S. Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4339-5_2

Building a radical alternative while remaining loyal to the PLO platform and its founding principles meant that the PFLP produced its policies starting from contrasting priorities. This fundamental contradiction entailed the appearance of an "opposition-integration" dilemma which led the PFLP's agency to fluctuate between conflicting concerns. It was the emergence of a persistent feature that would continue to afflict the PFLP's political agency and erode its effectiveness in the following years and decades. Throughout the mid-1980s, fluctuations and hesitancies compromised the PFLP's ability to influence and constrain the agenda of the PLO leadership. Moreover, the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma also affected relations with leftist partners such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Palestine Communist Party (PCP). As divergences emerged over how to oppose Fatah, the association attempts did not produce the desired results nor laid the basis for long-term collaboration. Pressures from supposedly regional allies did not help the PFLP either in navigating the turbulence of PLO politics with a consistent line. Dilemmas in policy making thus not only compromised action on the internal front but would also complicate the PFLP's foreign policy. The PFLP's predicament during the mid-1980s PLO crisis marked the beginning of its marginalisation process, although at this stage, its ultimate loyalty to Palestinian autonomous institutions still earned Habash's organisation credit with the wider Palestinian population and with its own rank-and-file.

Tipping the PLO Balance: The Bases of the PFLP's Opposition to Arafat's Diplomatic Strategy

The phase started in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which lasted until the First Intifada broke out in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in December 1987, entailed concrete dangers of elimination for the PLO. The three-month long "Lebanon war" witnessed the destruction of the PLO sanctuary in Beirut and the dispersal of thousands of Palestinian fighters to several Arab countries. Besides the military losses, the PLO also suffered a severe deterioration of its civilian infrastructure which never recovered its pre-war condition in the following years. Deprived of its quasi-state in Lebanon, the PLO diplomatic position appeared greatly weakened. This was all the more significant as several

peace plans, notably the one issued by the new US administration, were formulated in the wake of the PLO expulsion from Beirut.[1]

Although this was not the first attempt made by regional actors to "liquidate" the PLO, each faction realised that the "Palestinian revolution" was on the brink of disappearance, at risk of losing completely both its independence and its historical gains.[2] The perception of an unprecedentedly dangerous situation was, however, the only aspect on which the diverse PLO factions agreed while the identification of the threatening factors and the policy priorities differed considerably. Therefore, according to its own perceived dangers, the PFLP formulated, right after the eviction from Beirut, the bases of its action in the next phase.

For the PLO leadership, the loss of a prominent place in the Lebanese arena jeopardised its diplomatic efforts and reduced its bargaining power in the context of possible negotiations. Tighter relations with Jordan and Egypt aimed at a coordinated diplomatic strategy thus represented a viable option to compensate for such loss of leverage.[3] Moreover, the provisions of the newly drafted Reagan plan for peace encouraged PLO Chairman Arafat to find a common strategy with King Hussein of Jordan. The US plan, while avoiding any mention of Palestinian statehood, called for the formation of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation in view of direct negotiations, prelude to the establishment of a confederated state on the East and West banks of the Jordan River.[4] The American positions drove Arafat to start low-profile contacts with Hussein, although this at first was not confirmed officially.

The PFLP's understanding of the post-Beirut phase was completely different. In its view, after losing the Lebanese stronghold, the Palestinian revolution had to resist the proliferation of projects for a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both the Reagan plan and the so-called Arab peace plan adopted in Fez, in September 1982, had to be rejected as they entailed a PLO recognition of Israel. Moreover, the US-sponsored initiative disavowed the PLO status of sole representative of the Palestinian people, while boosting Jordan's attempts to co-opt the PLO and reviving its claims on the OPT. The PFLP identified another major threat in the implementation of what it called the "second step in the Camp David strategy". Washington and Tel Aviv aimed at detaching the Lebanese conflict from the question of Palestine and imposing a separate settlement between Lebanon and Israel. In this context, also the idea of ending the Arab boycott of Egypt, enforced following its peace treaty with Israel, was to be vehemently opposed. Finally, the Palestinian national movement had

to be wary of all those political personalities and forces, acting outside the PLO consensus, that aimed at forming an alternative representative platform and collaborating with Israel.[5] The PFLP pointed to the scheme of the "Villages League" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel had tried to impose in 1980 as a substitute of the PLO.[6]

These regional and international developments created a climate that encouraged the spread of what the PFLP perceived as "surrendering positions" within the Palestinian national movement, as demonstrated by the PLO leadership's orientations. The PFLP's priority, therefore, was to stop such trends and keep the PLO on its "natural nationalist path", the one that the history of the Palestinian revolution itself as well as the Palestinian National Charter had tracked.[7] The PFLP throughout its history had rejected political solutions to the Palestinian question, mainly for ideological and strategic reasons. Its view of the struggle for liberation as both a nationalist effort and a revolutionary process towards the emancipation of the Palestinian and Arab masses was at odds not only with the idea of negotiating with the Israeli counterpart. While Israel was defined as the perpetrator of the continued expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homeland and "imperialist bridgehead" in the region, negotiations also entailed coordination with the "Arab reactionary regimes", interested in the preservation of "imperialist and capitalist influence in the region".[8] Thus, by virtue of this articulated stance, the beginning of a US-led peace process would entail the end of the PFLP's *raison d'être*, leading therefore to a total marginalisation of PLO hard-line organisations. Finally, although the PFLP had fought against Palestinian interest in a political settlement since the times of the 1974 Geneva conference,[9] the virtual elimination of its military potential compromised the credibility of its rejectionist stand.

Nevertheless, the PFLP rejected the dismissal of guerrilla warfare as the first instrument to lead the struggle in a context of greater emphasis on a diplomatic approach. For the PFLP, the military dimension represented a source of legitimacy far more important than for Fatah. This latter organisation, relying both on a deeper grassroots support from the Palestinian population and on a wider network of international relations, enjoyed more sources of legitimisation. This was not the case for the PFLP whose smaller, though strong, mass base entailed a tighter link to the traditional PLO legitimising rhetoric. Following the armed organisations' takeover of the PLO in the late 1960, legitimacy stemmed directly from military

capabilities and effectiveness. Thus, in the early 1980s, armed struggle remained crucial for the PFLP.[10]

Starting from these premises, the PFLP's task for the new stage was to propose and embody an alternative to the PLO leadership, to set up a radical option within the Palestinian national movement in order to counterbalance the so-called moderates and keep the PLO on that "nationalist line" where the PFLP could still preserve its role and influence. The deepening of the historical divide between moderates and rejectionists within the PLO emerged clearly since the end of 1982 and would last for the next five years. Simultaneously, the PFLP elaborated the concept which would guide its political action, as well as justify it, in the subsequent years: the insistence on rejection and the effort to rally as much support as possible around this call were aimed at countering the "attempt of imperialism and of the Arab reaction to distort and dissipate the Palestinian revolution". From this stemmed the "fundamental mission" of "preserving the national Palestinian unity on the basis of the right nationalist line".[11] From this perspective, all the attempts eventually made by the PFLP to build and broaden a "nationalist front" in opposition to the PLO leadership were never intended to create a substitute for the PLO, but rather aimed at preserving its "original anti-imperialist" approach, the only one, according to the PFLP, ensuring the unity of the Palestinian revolution. In summer 1985, in the midst of the so-called War of the Camps, started by the Shiʿi movement Amal in the attempt to clear Beirut of the Palestinian armed presence, this concept was still at the centre of the PFLP's political analysis, as the words of Taysir Qubʿa, Deputy Head of the PFLP's Political Relations Department, demonstrated:

> We [the Palestinian National Salvation Front, a coalition that grouped the PFLP and Syrian-proxy factions opposed to the 1985 Arafat-Hussein agreement] are the leadership of the Palestinian people until we guarantee the unity of the PLO on its anti-imperialist line.[12]

The PFLP's discourse continued to focus throughout this phase on a PLO internal dualism according to which legitimacy stemming from rejection and commitment to resistance was opposed to "deviation" from the right path outlined in particular by the resolutions of the 14th and, after February 1983, of the 16th session of the PNC. During these two sessions, the PLO condemned the Sadat-Begin peace treaty and stressed the PLO status of sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people as

well as stated the impossibility of sharing this right with any actor involved and its adherence to armed struggle.[13]

To bolster its perspective on Palestinian unity, in early 1983 the PFLP gave prominence to the declarations issued by the leaders of other Palestinian factions and by respected independent personalities who were close to its views. *Al-Hadaf* not only published long conversations with the DFLP's Secretary-General Nayef Hawatmeh or with PNC Speaker Khaled al-Fahhum, but also reported those speeches and declarations in which Arafat espoused a more "revolutionary" rhetoric, downplaying or neglecting those occasions when he showed a more overt disposition to dialogue with Arab actors. Conversely, when condemning the "wrong positions" within the Palestinian national movement, the PFLP usually did not mention explicitly those adopting these stands and preferred referring to them as "Palestinian reaction" or "Palestinian right".[14]

While the call to unity aimed at compacting the Palestinian fold in the face of Jordanian plans, the PFLP also operated a significant shift concerning its medium-term goals, again in order to bolster its nationalist stand and gather support around it. Before 1982, despite a de facto relinquishment of the strategic goal of establishing a socialist, pan-Arab state beyond the boundaries of historic Palestine, the PFLP never questioned it officially. However, in the post-Beirut phase the PFLP affirmed the necessity of endorsing the "tactical" call for the creation of an independent Palestinian state.[15] In this new phase the PFLP started to support strongly the idea of a democratic state ensuring equal rights to both Jews and Arabs, historically claimed by Fatah, while this latter movement completed its shift towards the project of a mini-state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.[16]

The underlying principle of the PFLP's policies in the post-Beirut phase highlighted its willingness to forge its opposition within the boundaries of the PLO. Such concept of loyal opposition meant making a persuasive argument about its own idea of Palestinian legitimacy and gather the support of other factions around it, thus counterbalancing the PLO leadership. However, both old and new paradigms of Palestinian politics did not allow a straightforward realisation of this goal. Arafat's growing power within the PLO, the intra-leftist divisions and the exposure to new external sources of pressure would impair the PFLP's strategy.

Institutional Opposition: Constraining the Moderate Leadership Within the PLO

Between late 1982 and early 1983, Yasser Arafat's efforts focused on harvesting, at the international level, the fruits of his fifteen-year-long career as PLO Chairman and translating them into diplomatic gains. While working to undermine this agenda, the PFLP aimed at keeping its opposition within the boundaries of PLO institutional politics. This meant containing Arafat's diplomatic strategy through the traditional schemes of consensus politics, according to which the main PLO institutions, particularly the PNC, would only sanction those decisions enjoying a general agreement among the factions.[17] In line with this principle, the PFLP believed that the PLO Chairman's need for wide national approval would entail concessions to his diplomatic agenda. However, the PFLP failed to realise that internal PLO balances had mutated significantly following the loss of Beirut. More specifically, the PFLP did not grasp that the consensus principle lost its centrality in favour of majority politics.[18] Arafat's resolve to pursue a rapprochement with Jordan, Egypt and the United States throughout the mid-1980s, would reflect such major shift in Palestinian politics.

Yet the PLO Chairman's course of actions in this phase provoked significant tensions within the whole Palestinian national movement and even within Fatah itself. Therefore, the PFLP tried to mobilise the PLO opposition in order to sway Fatah's own internal debate over Arafat's line. Nonetheless, working for a more favourable PLO consensus entailed concessions also on the part of the opposition. The PFLP was thus confronted with the challenge of constraining the PLO leadership diplomatic turn and strengthening its rejectionist bid within a consensus politics framework that would ensure PLO unity. The 16th session of the PNC was to be the first arena to test the PFLP's ability to balance these different political priorities.

The PFLP feared that in the confusion of the post-Beirut phase, the PLO leadership line, which initially did not enjoy official Palestinian recognition, could lead the national movement towards a quick series of concessions and consequently to the relinquishment of its main historical goals. The first of these concessions lay in the possibility of sharing the status of representative of the Palestinian people with Jordan, a move that the PFLP considered as the first step towards the acceptance of the Reagan plan and the recognition of Israel's right to exist. Therefore, during the

first months of 1983, the PFLP was interested in a rapid convocation of the 16th session of the PNC through which it hoped to halt the drift towards concessions.[19] At the same time, the PFLP was aware of several and opposing sources of pressure on the PLO coming from the Arab world. Despite countries such as Syria and Libya expressed positions closer to their understanding of the new phase, the PFLP did not want these pressures to undermine the unity of the national movement in such delicate circumstances.[20] In this context, the PFLP's objective for the incoming PNC session was the preservation of unity among the Palestinian factions, but also the retention of a "nationalist" line, namely a less accommodating diplomatic stance. For these reasons, the PFLP made clear its firm belief that the only way to achieve this was through the confirmation of the 14th and the 15th PNC resolutions which condemned the American conflict settlement projects and restated the collective nature of the PLO decision-making process.[21] In other words, the PFLP's first response to the challenging aftermath of the PLO eviction from Beirut amounted to the preservation of the internal Palestinian status-quo existing before the Israeli invasion.

The need to find a consensus within the Palestinian fold, but also to exclude an excessively moderate line, prompted the PFLP's participation in an intense intra-factional dialogue. Several meetings were held during this period resulting in the signature of the programmatic documents issued subsequently. First the PFLP showed a more accommodating position towards the PLO Chairman's participation in and contribution to the peace settlement proposals presented by the Arab countries and the Soviet Union. After three days of talks in Aden, the PFLP, the DFLP and Fatah agreed to give Yasser Arafat "political flexibility based on the Fez summit project and the Soviet initiatives and plans".[22] Although the document also stated that Jordan would not be authorised to act as a representative of the Palestinian people, this concession meant that, at this point, the leftist opposition did not want to veto Arafat's attempts to coordinate with King Hussein, thus forcing a very risky showdown in terms of PLO cohesiveness.

At the same time, the PFLP, alongside the DFLP, continued to pressure the PLO leadership by making explicit its closeness to the critical positions expressed by Syria, Libya and their Palestinian proxies. Indeed, in mid-January 1983 these two factions gathered in the Libyan capital Tripoli with the Syrian-aligned PF-GC, Sa'iqa and the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF), under Colonel Gaddafi's patronage. The document issued

was a sum of rejectionist stands: the five factions stated their refusal of every peace settlement entailing the recognition of the "Zionist enemy" and affirmed that the Arab initiative delineated in the Fez plan "aimed at reaching the Reagan plan and spread the Camp David blueprint". Finally, also the possibility to share the representative status with Jordan was harshly condemned.[23] The restatement of such intransigent positions only a month after the flexibility demonstrated in Aden appeared fairly ambiguous, but through this move the PFLP intended to pressure Arafat, reminding him that despite being loyal to the integrity of the PLO platform, it shared some major conceptions about the agenda for the new stage with the Syrian regime, Arafat's main rival in the wake of the Lebanon War.[24]

With these premises, the Palestinian organisations decided to convene the PNC in Algiers between 14 and 22 February 1983. At the end of this session, the higher Palestinian institutional body issued a series of resolutions that attempted to satisfy every faction. As a consequence, the agreed political line was far from being clearly defined leaving each organisation the chance to draw its own conclusions from the final document.[25]

The PNC resolutions stressed the importance of collective leadership to preserve the cohesiveness of the PLO as well as the need to preserve the independence of Palestinian action from any Arab influence, be it Syrian or Jordanian. Nevertheless, the most important decisions taken during the Council concerned the PLO stand towards the Fez plan and Jordan. The Arab peace plan was defined as "the minimum for Arab political action" to be "complemented by military action".[26] Notwithstanding the reference to armed struggle, clearly stressed to appease the opposition, such a formulation showed that the PFLP did not reject completely a negotiation framework contemplating the PLO's recognition of Israel.

Regarding Jordan, the PNC decreed that in the future, relations with the Hashemite Kingdom could be established on the basis of a "confederation between two independent states".[27] In light of these outcomes, the PFLP and the rest of the leftist opposition saw just a partial fulfilment of their demands with reference to the establishment of tighter relations with Syria and the renewed recognition of the strategic nature of the alliance with the Soviet Union. Ultimately, not all the "gates to the Reagan plan" were closed,[28] as Habash himself had declared during his PNC speech, and Arafat was granted enough freedom to pursue his diplomatic line.[29]

The intra-Palestinian dialogue that preceded the 16th PNC session, as well as the resolution that ensued, demonstrated that at this point, the

PFLP prioritised PLO cohesiveness over opposition to Arafat's agenda. The PFLP's acceptance of political settlement as a possible solution substantiates this assumption. More specifically, Habash's faction deemed the formation of a growing pole countering the diplomatic turn a viable political option. In fact, this was the goal that the PFLP continued to pursue over the coming years, encouraged by the criticisms and divisions emerging within Fatah.

The Formation of the Joint Command and Fatah's Internal Split

The establishment of a coalition of the PLO opposition factions did not only serve the goal of acquiring more weight within Palestinian institutions. The PFLP aimed at emerging as the responsible actor whose line could attract support also from some sectors within Fatah which did not view Arafat's diplomatic orientation favourably. As Fatah's internal strife deepened, spilling into a military confrontation, the coalition politics scheme, and its expansion, signalled the PFLP's willingness to maintain its opposition within the boundaries of the PLO. However, the unfolding of Fatah's split would demonstrate the limits of coalitions politics within the national movement.

The PFLP started immediately to express its doubts and to a certain extent its disappointment with the resolutions approved at the 16th PNC. What worried Habash's organisation the most was the ambiguity of the political line which emerged from the PNC, a lack of clarity which left too much space for "interpretations and comments" that the "Palestinian right could exploit to implement a policy of negotiation in the upcoming months". For this reason, the final PNC resolution represented only the "minimum level" upon which the PLO was able to preserve its unity. This sceptical attitude was translated into the formulation of two main political priorities: first, the "national progressive forces" within the Palestinian arena had to monitor the respect of PNC resolutions in order to avoid any autocratic drift by the PLO leadership in implementing the agreed political line. In other words, the PFLP saw the collective leadership of the PLO as a security measure to prevent Arafat's imposition of his own interpretation of the PNC resolutions. Secondly, relations with Syria had to undergo a real "correction" as the PLO and Syria were at the "forefront of the defensive line" against the "imperialist attack" still going on in the region.

Beyond the anti-imperialist rhetoric, Syria was not only the main PFLP supporter, but also a counterweight to Jordan's rapprochement.[30]

The PFLP's suspicions were quickly confirmed as Arafat, despite some hesitation, continued his contacts with King Hussein in the attempt to make a breakthrough and reach an entente for coordination.[31] From this stemmed the PFLP's necessity to bolster its constraining power. The principal means to reach this goal was coordinating its efforts with the other Palestinian factions opposed to a PLO-Jordanian shared representation and above all to Arafat's growing power within the Palestinian national movement. The pattern of "coalition politics", namely the establishment of political alliances to bolster one faction's political weight, emerged at this point and became a recurring theme in the PFLP's policies for more than a decade. It signalled a condition of weakness as the PFLP was now unable to erect alone a sufficient obstacle to Arafat's policies.[32]

In this context, the PFLP and the DFLP started to hold meetings and issue joint statements in which they affirmed their resolve to avoid any retreat from the PNC's resolutions, namely further concessions to Jordan or any move perceived as favourable to American plans for the region.[33] Finally, at the end of June, the two Fronts announced the official formation of a "Joint Political and Military Command" as the first step towards the unification of the two main Marxist-Leninist forces within the PLO after more than a decade since the split enacted by Hawatmeh and his followers. The renewed stress on the importance of implementing the PNC's resolutions reflected the extent of the Popular and the Democratic Fronts' concern over Arafat's "deviations" and "individualistic" turn.[34] Moreover, during summer 1983 Fatah experienced a serious internal crisis as an armed insurrection led by some military officers exploded in Syria-controlled areas of Lebanon. The rebels led by Colonel Sa'id Maragha (Abu Musa) contested Arafat's diplomatic strategy and affirmed that he stopped embodying the "common denominator" of the Palestinian national movement. His de facto abandonment of armed struggle and his continued contacts with the United States and with the conservative regimes in the region resulted in a complete loss of legitimacy. Counting on Syrian political and material support the rebel officers launched an attack on Fatah forces loyal to Arafat, aiming at ousting the PLO Chairman.[35] The PFLP estimated that presenting a united Left during these circumstances could be very beneficial and strengthen the stands of the PLO opposition vis-à-vis the leadership.[36]

The next step in this direction was the formulation and announcement of a "program for unity and the democratic reform of the PLO". In this political document, the Joint Command condensed its criticisms of the current problematic aspects at the base of the PLO divisions in general and the Fatah infighting in particular. In the understanding of the Joint Command, organisational and political faults were intertwined: the "individualistic and factional" approach of the PLO rightist leadership allowed the ongoing dialogue with Jordan and behind it the United States. This trend represented a clear violation of all PNC resolutions, both old and new, and was the main factor which led to the military uprising within Fatah itself. Despite condemning Abu Musa and his followers' recourse to violence, the Joint Command ascribed full responsibility to the PLO leadership which failed to stand effectively against the pressures coming from the "Arab reaction" which aimed at dragging the PLO into the American peace camp.[37] The PFLP and the DFLP were convinced that the implementation of collective leadership at all levels of the PLO institutions, besides a firm rejectionist stand vis-à-vis the Reagan plan and the Jordanian project for confederation, represented the solution for current PLO problems.[38]

In issuing such a programme the two Fronts thought they would be able to win substantial support within the Palestinian national movement and, in particular, among Fatah's left-wingers as grievances towards Arafat's management of the PLO in the post-Beirut phase were fairly diffuse. Not only the contacts with Jordan stirred resentments within Fatah, but also the leadership's overall diplomatic attitude which put military reorganisation behind the need to keep dialogue open with all the actors involved in the different scenarios of the US-sponsored peace settlement, such as the Lebanese Authorities.[39] In this framework, the Joint Command proposed and adopted a defensive attitude prioritising the protection of older political programmes and positions such as those stated in the interim programme issued during the 14th PNC session held in Damascus in 1979.[40]

In calling for a programme to reform the PLO, approval of the rebels' reasons but not yet an explicit call for Arafat's resignation, full support for the Syrian role in the region but adherence to the independence of Palestinian action, the Joint Command and notably the PFLP presented themselves as guaranteeing PLO unity and preserving the right political course, hoping to reverse the internal balance of power. Nonetheless, the escalation of the Fatah rebels' military assault eroded the already marginal

supports that their arguments enjoyed. Besides, Syria's hegemonic designs on the PLO became more and more intolerable for its Palestinian allies, particularly the PFLP, as they questioned the loyalty of their opposition. What appeared as an occasion to change the "rightist course" of the post-Beirut phase turned into a chance for Arafat to assert his grip on the PLO and find further determination in the path towards the American sphere of influence.[41]

This became fully clear with the step that the PLO Chairman decided to undertake in December 1983. Arafat managed successfully the situation in Tripoli, when Palestinian rebel forces besieged his loyalists in the Lebanese coastal town. Diplomatic contacts and outstanding tactical expertise by Fatah officials thwarted Syrian efforts to get rid of the PLO leadership. Arafat emerged strengthened from this confrontation: he enjoyed undisputed mass support throughout the whole duration of the crisis and eventually left Tripoli and Lebanon under US and French protection. Emboldened by this outcome, Arafat decided to visit Cairo and meet with President Hosni Mubarak, marking the first breach of the still standing Arab boycott of Egypt.[42] Through this step, Arafat challenged once more Syria's agenda and signalled his determination to carry on with his diplomatic initiative. This move entailed some qualitative changes in several aspects. The level of contacts and negotiations between Fatah and Jordan increased and consequently this hardened the PFLP's reaction, finally causing a much deeper split within the PLO.

The PFLP immediately escalated its verbal attacks against the PLO chairman and called for the first time for his resignation, since the meeting with Mubarak represented a "clear deviation from what was established by several PNC sessions", included the 16th. Habash did not hesitate to define Arafat as "the Palestinian Sadat", an expression which summarised the PFLP's political understanding of Arafat's visit to Cairo: just like the late Egyptian president, the PLO Chairman took this step individually, without even consulting with Fatah's Revolutionary Council, and made explicit his determination to take part actively in the Camp David settlement model that the US administration was trying to impose on the whole region.[43]

The PFLP now hoped that Arafat had condemned himself to isolation not only within the PLO and the Palestinian national movement but also within his own organisation. For this reason, the PFLP directed its attacks towards the person of Arafat only, while being careful to respect Fatah's adherence to the "nationalist line", or at least to the lowest common

denominator of the PLO unity.[44] The goal was once again to achieve a shift in the PLO's internal balance. As Arafat's discharge became an "urgent national mission", the PFLP decided to step up the pattern of coalition politics and called for the formation of a "broader nationalist front" gathering all those opposed to the "deviationist and defeatist line".[45] In this context, the PFLP and the DFLP issued a joint statement along with the PCP and the smaller Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) in what can be considered as the first step towards the creation of the Democratic Alliance (DA), gathering the PLO leftist opposition. The statement invited "all nationalist forces, the members of the PNC and those of the Palestine Central Council (PCC), to raise their voices against the policy of capitulation". Moreover, these four factions aimed at obtaining Arafat's dismissal through the "prompt convocation" of the PCC. Actually, the leftist opposition probably saw this institution, which fulfilled the legislative function when the PNC was not in session, as more suited to its goals than the Arafat-dominated Executive Committee or the PNC itself, whose size and composition made a vote for his removal more unlikely. Hence, the PFLP and other opposition factions pressured Fatah's Central Committee to "develop its position vis-à-vis Arafat" in order to ease the convocation of the PCC, where Arafat would be "judged democratically".[46]

The development of the Fatah split tested the political effectiveness of the Joint Command as well as clarified its limits. Placed between Arafat's "deviant" path and the rebels' excesses, the PFLP-DFLP coalition did not manage to attract the necessary political support within the PLO to restrain its chairman. In fact, Arafat demonstrated himself able to rally nationalist support and strengthen factional cohesion in the face of Syrian-backed aggression. Afterwards, as the expanded leftist coalition embarked on a dialogue with Fatah to heal the PLO divisions, the PFLP needed to address factional differences in addition to Arafat's reassertion of power over Fatah and the PLO.

Pressures from Within, Pressures from Without: The PFLP's Fluctuation in the Intra-Palestinian Dialogue

The intra-Palestinian dialogue that followed the conclusion of Fatah's internal confrontation brought the tensions affecting the PFLP to the fore. The PFLP's adherence to an expanded coalition scheme continued

to signal its willingness to remain integrated within the PLO and bolster the weight of its loyal opposition. However, as the Palestinian factions worked out a reconciliation agreement, the PFLP struggled to harmonise such thrust towards integration with the base of its opposition initiative, namely rejectionism and alignment with Damascus.

Following Arafat's talks with Mubarak, some public criticisms and condemnations did emerge from the ranks of his own organisation and the PFLP made sure to sufficiently emphasise them.[47] However, not only was the majority of Fatah unwilling to dismiss Arafat from his post, but several top leaders in fact backed rapprochement with Egypt. Fatah's Central Committee avoided taking a harsh position towards him stating once and for all that his leadership was not questionable.[48] Encouraged by such support, the PLO Chairman decided to resume more resolutely the contacts with King Hussein. These developments once again demonstrated the Left's inability to exert sufficient pressure to restrain Fatah's leader. Nevertheless, the PFLP, in the context of the leftist coalition it was helping to build, did not abandon its goal of stopping Arafat's steps towards the "American settlement" within the PLO legal framework. As a consequence, the position of the PFLP and the leftist opposition continued to fluctuate between refusing to come to terms with the PLO majority and openness to dialogue. As evidence of such fluctuations, the DA held a meeting in Aden at the end of March 1984, during which it expressed a severe critique of the PLO leadership's course. The statement issued emphasised the traditional rejectionist calls on Palestinian-Jordanian coordination while invoking collective leadership of the PLO and a reorganisation of the seats within the Executive Committee capable of ensuring the implementation of a truly nationalist line.[49] However, a month later during a meeting in Algiers, the same DA appeared ready to open dialogue with Fatah and agreed with a delegation of its Central Committee on the necessity to convene a new session of the PNC after the achievement of a preliminary "political and organisational" consensus. This last point appeared as the only tangible result of these preliminary talks since the document issued mostly included a series of set phrases on Palestinian steadfastness.[50] These shifts in the DA position also showed how the whole leftist opposition shared the same concern for maintaining their initiative within the PLO legality. However, the extent of such concern varied, placing the PFLP on the hardliner edge of the leftist coalition.

The PFLP did view the results of the Algiers meeting with relative satisfaction: the precondition for a "comprehensive Palestinian national

consensus" before the convocation of the 17th PNC was seen as an effective card to impose a more acceptable compromise on Fatah, entailing the abandonment of Arafat-Hussein coordination.[51] Indeed, the PFLP exploited regularly, throughout negotiations with Fatah Central Committee and after, the pretext of comprehensive consensus to obtain the continued deferment of the new PNC session. The reasons for such conduct were multi-fold. Syria's pressure was undoubtedly a prominent factor behind the PFLP's reluctance to accept the convocation of the PNC as the Assad regime was still willing to put an end to Arafat's dominance of the PLO.[52] Furthermore, Syria's goals in this case were consistent with the PFLP's need to shift the internal Palestinian balance. Unlike the DFLP, the PFLP reiterated its determination to obtain "Arafat's fall" as well as continuing to demand the participation of Syrian-proxy factions in the PNC,[53] notwithstanding their recourse to violence and their readiness to establish an alternative PLO, a principle that the PFLP had traditionally rejected. This insistence on PLO "regime-change" was a constant in the PFLP's intra-Palestinian policies as Habash's organisation historically formulated, throughout the different phases of Palestinian history, the goal of substituting "PLO rightist leadership" with a "leftist, proletarian vanguard".[54] Despite being an impossible objective by the mid-1980s, the PLO leadership change retained a significant rhetorical relevance for the PFLP. This was not the case for the DFLP, which had maintained closer relations with Fatah since its very foundation by virtue of Arafat's military cover offered to Hawatmeh and company during the 1969 split. Moreover, the DFLP had actively supported the PLO adoption of a diplomatic strategy alongside armed struggle since the early 1970s and notably, following the adoption of the so-called Ten-Point Program in 1974 by the PNC.[55] Consequently, the DFLP was more flexible than the PFLP towards Arafat's bold moves; both prioritised PLO integration, but rejectionist tropes and hard-line opposition had more weight in the PFLP's policy making. Thus, even when in June 1984 the DA and the Fatah Central Committee finally reached an agreement in Aden aimed at preserving PLO unity, the confrontation could not be considered closed.

The so-called Aden-Algiers agreement appeared as a political victory for the PLO leftist opposition in many respects. First of all, the document envisaged those organisational reforms the PFLP regularly called for: the creation of a Secretariat-General, the expansion of the PCC powers and the establishment of "special committees to supervise political affairs" were all measures aimed at controlling the initiative of the PLO chairman.

Furthermore, Fatah and the DA agreed on the inclusion of the PCP within the PLO, apparently bolstering the Palestinian Left's overall position in the PNC. Concerning the political aspects and specifically PLO foreign policy, Fatah seemed to make a good deal of concessions to its leftist counterpart: indeed, the document suggested a halt to coordination with Jordan, restated the need to isolate Egypt as long as the Mubarak regime would not relinquish the Camp David agreements and also affirmed the will to improve relations with Syria on a "pan-Arab basis" and on the basis of "mutual respects" and "non-interference in internal affairs". Conversely, the DA agreed to hold the 17th PNC no later than the 15th September as well as that Arafat's visit to Egypt, though condemned by the document, would be judged during the National Council rather than at the Central Council.[56]

Despite these outstanding results and the positive rhetoric that welcomed them, there were two main factors fostering the impasse. First, immediately after the conclusion of the agreements, the PFLP signalled that, in its understanding, "the comprehensive dialogue and consensus", to be reached before the PNC, should inevitably include the pro-Syrian factions, now coalesced in the National Alliance (NA).[57] This represented by itself a huge obstacle to a real implementation of the Aden-Algiers agreement since the NA not only considered the agreement itself as the DA's adherence to the "deviationist path" but defined Arafat's ouster, to be obtained out of PLO institutional legitimacy, as a precondition to any kind of negotiations.[58] Secondly, the PLO Chairman largely ignored the agreement, as he continued the pursuit of rapprochement with Mubarak and coordination with King Hussein. Indeed, during the second part of summer 1984, Arafat met with the Jordanian monarch to discuss the issue of PLO reconciliation.[59] All of these "Arafat violations" were indicated by the PFLP as reasons for the failed implementation of the Aden-Algiers agreement; consequently the PFLP urged Fatah's Central Committee to "take a clear position" towards them, trying to pressure once again for a dissociation of the Central Committee from its leader.[60]

As the set date for the PNC approached and given Arafat's moves and declarations as well as the intransigence of the NA, the PFLP supported the deferment of the 17th session.[61] Through this request, on the one hand the PFLP demonstrated its sensibility to Syria's priorities, benefitting in this also from Algeria's position, which did not accept hosting the PNC unless all Palestinian factions reached a global understanding.[62] On the other, the PFLP conceived the confrontation with Arafat through

the lens of the traditional PLO consensus pattern, according to which the convocation of the PNC without a comprehensive consensus was not admissible.

The PFLP's shortcomings in understanding the changed political situation finally became clear in November, when Arafat, in an unprecedented step, decided to convene the PNC unilaterally, without the fulfilment of a national consensus, and on 12 November issued invitations to the PNC members, bypassing the PNC Speaker al-Fahhum who refused to do so, in alignment with PFLP and pro-Syrian positions. Furthermore, to underline his adherence to coordination with Jordan, Arafat accepted King Hussein's proposal to hold the session in Amman, for the first time after the 1970–71 war between PLO armed organisations and the Jordanian army.[63]

The PFLP's intransigence contributed to exacerbating the PLO's internal crisis, letting it reach a level never observed before. Notwithstanding the DFLP's criticisms, which favoured an approach more open to dialogue, in these circumstances the PFLP went too far in its attempt to restrain "Arafat's deviation". The PFLP miscalculated Arafat's resolve to have his collaboration with Jordan sanctioned by the PNC, and it ignored the diminished importance that the consensus principle had in Palestinian politics at this stage. More significantly, its conduct showed how Habash's organisation prioritised the preservation of a radical and steadfast attitude to the detriment of establishing a real and effective coalition with the other Palestinian leftist forces. More broadly, the PFLP's conduct throughout the intra-Palestinian dialogue highlighted its difficulties in managing several conflicting factors. Syrian pressure, factional priorities and the legacy of its hard-line rejectionism resulted in an unclear set of policies that ultimately favoured Arafat's agenda.

The 17th and the 18th PNCs: From Total Rejection to Reconciliation

The approximately three-year-long period separating these PNC sessions was a hectic one. In such a time lapse the PLO leadership passed from the successful imposition of its line on the Palestinian national movement to the apparently irreversible failure of a political process begun right after the evacuation from Beirut.

At the same time, the PFLP faced an unprecedented impasse in terms of political initiative. The initial diplomatic successes of the PLO Chairman

underlined the PFLP's lack of an effective alternative. Arafat managed to conclude positively the PNC convened in Amman and afterwards consecrated its choice for the Jordan option through a coordination agreement with King Hussein. Faced with the ostensible success of the diplomatic strategy, the PFLP replied with the formation of yet another coalition, the Palestine National Salvation Front (PNSF), which soon demonstrated limited viability and effectiveness. The PFLP was reacting to Arafat's activism and also to regional developments, which despite being both positive and negative for the PFLP, underscored the political impasse it was experiencing. In fact, notwithstanding the PFLP's continuous denunciations, regional and international pressure played a bigger role in the failure of Arafat's strategy: the PLO Chairman's unwillingness to cede to US and Jordanian demands was the main cause of the Arafat-Hussein coordination deadlock, later leading to the King's abandonment of it, a result to which the PFLP contributed only partially.

Ultimately, the PFLP's conduct during these years of continued tensions within the PLO reflected on the one hand, the progress of its marginalisation process. On the other, it evidenced the prominence of full PLO reconciliation and reintegration among the PFLP's goals. The PFLP appeared ready to open dialogue with Fatah and drop the majority of its accusations against the PLO Chairman as soon as the failure of his diplomatic agenda forced him to return to more "nationalist, anti-imperialist" positions. In addition, the PFLP's participation in the PNSF also highlighted its exposure to Syrian external pressures which had already emerged before the Amman PNC. In sum, fluctuations marked prominently the PFLP's agency between 1984 and early 1987, as it shifted from association with Syrian proxies to realignment with the rest of the PLO mainstream.

Arafat's Progresses and the PFLP's Choice of Syrian Proxies

The PFLP's condemnation of the unilateral convocation of the PNC by Fatah Central Committee was immediate. In a Politburo statement, the PFLP rejected the accusations of the "Palestinian rightists" as well as rebutting the criticisms coming from some representatives of the "democratic forces" who blamed the PFLP for its intransigence and its continual requests to delay the PNC. Rather, the PFLP pointed out that, coming

after Reagan's re-election and Jordanian-Egyptian rapprochement, this step represented the PLO "deviationist leadership's" official endorsement of US political settlement plans. Based on the Camp David blueprint, the Reagan plan and the "delegation" of Palestinian representation to Jordan, such a global "liquidatory" project was likely to be revived under the re-elected Reagan administration.[64]

Deprived of much room for action, the PFLP could not but call for the boycott of this "divisive PNC". Moreover, although the DFLP decided not to participate in the Council alongside the PFLP, Arafat's step had as a consequence the de facto end of the leftist coalition. Indeed, Hawatmeh's organisation declared on 20 November that it would freeze its participation in the Joint Command: the DFLP blamed the "PFLP's counterproductive stand" represented by its refusal to resume participation in the PLO Executive Committee before the opening of the PNC, without guarantee of inclusion for the pro-Syrian factions.[65]

The PFLP's hopes that the PLO Chairman would not have been able to reach the quorum and receive the PNC's official approval for his diplomatic strategy were soon disappointed, as its call to boycott did not thwart Arafat's goal.[66] The meeting sealed Arafat's policy of coordination with Jordan: after letting King Hussein give the opening speech, the Council charged the Executive Committee with "pursuing the dialogue with Jordan" as well as "studying" Hussein's proposals, in particular the invitation to recognise UN Security Council Resolution 242. Furthermore, the PNC's official appreciation of "Egypt's increasing support for Palestinian goals in the period between the 16th and the 17th sessions" made explicit the PLO shift towards the Mubarak regime and its alignment with the so-called Cairo-Amman axis.[67]

Between the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985, the PFLP was in considerable disarray. Viewed from an external perspective, Arafat's course could be interpreted as the choice of Jordanian tutelage, entailing a weakened PLO position within the framework of a US-conceived peace process.[68] Nevertheless, the successful conclusion of the PNC bolstered the PLO Chairman's position within the PLO and more broadly the Palestinian national movement. Arafat proved capable of not only imposing his line on the rest of the PLO, but also of doing so without concessions to the opposition, shifting towards an unprecedented majority politics approach. This was probably something that the PFLP did not expect and in the aftermath of the "Amman Council" it reacted with a reiteration of previous positions and calls: notwithstanding the failure in bringing together

the NA and the DA, Habash repeated to Arab and international media that the PFLP now "struggled for the organisation of a unifying national council".[69] The call for unity and the declared adherence to the Aden-Algiers agreement, the principles of the Joint Command and the DA, all of which had by then lost their operative meaning, highlighted the PFLP's lack of initiative. This flaw was to be further stressed by the next move that Arafat decided to undertake, to which the PFLP replied by implementing the same pattern of coalition politics.

Shortly after the PNC, Yasser Arafat stepped up his efforts at coordination with King Hussein and finally, on 11 February 1985, the two leaders announced their "bid for joint action" in order to "move together towards the achievement of a just and peaceful settlement of the Middle East crisis". The text of the agreement represented a further significant evolution in the PLO leadership position, which revolutionised its stand within the space of a couple of years. Indeed, the "Amman agreement", as it became known, entailed, at least in theory, the PLO's implicit acceptance of the principle of "land for peace", its commitment to a political solution to be negotiated through an international conference inclusive of all interested parties as well as, more significantly, its consensus to achieve Palestinian self-determination "within the context of the formation of the proposed confederated Arab States of Jordan and Palestine".[70]

The PFLP grasped the qualitative nature of Arafat's step and the perils it implied.[71] The agreement and the alleged dismissal of the most important principles stated in the Palestinian National Charter worryingly came in the framework of Arab and international efforts in support of the Jordanian-Palestinian initiative, embodied by Reagan's meeting with King Hussein and the Kings of Saudi Arabia and Morocco. The PFLP's analysis correctly viewed the agreement as an unprecedented concession to the United States first, but also to Israel, both of which constantly continued to refuse direct talks with the Palestinians, considering Jordan the only possible partner for negotiations. At the same time, the United States and Israel alike also rejected the idea of an international conference entailing the participation of the USSR.[72] Furthermore, although after the signing of the agreement the PLO Executive Committee issued a communique to reaffirm its rejection of UN Security Council resolution 242,[73] both Egypt and Jordan reaffirmed their reliance upon UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, making clear that for the PLO's Arab partners, this was not an amendable point.[74] In this context, the PLO leadership, as underlined by the PFLP, was expected to endure increasing pressures once the

implementation process of the agreement started.[75] Conversely, the PFLP seemed to have a less accurate analysis regarding the suitable reply to such a move. George Habash clarified that the only way to achieve the fall of the Arafat-Hussein agreement was through the creation of a "broad, nationalist front". The reiteration of such a call was supported by the PFLP's optimistic view according to which the differences among the Palestinian opposition forces, namely between the DA and the NA, would decrease in the light of Arafat's step, allowing the possibility of forming a new coalition to emerge.[76] Such a consideration highlighted the extent to which the PFLP's agenda in this period had a "reactive" character, since again Arafat was the one setting the terms of the Palestinian internal conflict and only his persistence in the diplomatic path could heal the rifts among his opponents.

In the end, not all the differences within the opposition were cancelled. Notwithstanding its effort, the PFLP was not able to bring together the DA and the pro-Syrian factions: despite its condemnation of the Amman agreement, the DFLP was not ready to join a front reuniting all the Palestinian factions but Fatah, as this could further consolidate the PLO split.[77] Having committed itself to the line of no dialogue with the PLO leadership, the PFLP moved closer to the NA and with its members, the PFLP-GC, the PSF, Sa'iqa and the Fatah rebels, declared the formation of the PNSF in late March 1985, clearly with Damascus' favour. In this new edition of the PFLP's scheme of coalition politics, the oppositional nature of the new alliance was made more explicit. In effect, besides renewed attachment to the PLO's unique representative status, the two main "political missions" were the "fall of the Amman agreement" and the end of the "deviationist approach" that only the "substitution of the rightist leadership" could ensure. In reply to those, especially Fatah members and sympathisers, who accused the PNSF of trying to establish an alternative PLO, the founding document stated that the Front was just a "temporary framework working to restore the PLO nationalist anti-imperialist line".[78] Although several members of the PNSF had attempted to topple Arafat militarily in the past, the PFLP mostly intended the new coalition as a mean to pressure the PLO leadership as this was in line with the policies that the PFLP adopted since the evacuation from Beirut and with its attempts to build oppositional coalitions. This represented a major difference with PNSF members such as Sa'iqa which remained committed to a military solution to Arafat's deviation. On this basis, the PNSF's ability to formulate a viable alternative within the national movement appeared

limited. Consequently, evaluating to what extent the PNSF managed to pressure the PLO leadership effectively is not straightforward. In fact, this difficulty stemmed from several factors which influenced Arafat's political course during 1985 and 1986.

First, as the PFLP expected, the United States presented additional demands to the PLO. Initially the Americans agreed on PLO acceptance of resolution 242 after the first meeting between the United States and the joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation, supposedly as a preliminary step towards direct talks with Israel. Nevertheless, a short time before the scheduled meeting, Washington demanded PLO recognition before the beginning of the summit. Consequently, the meeting was cancelled as Arafat was not willing to cede on this point so rapidly, and the success of Hussein-Arafat coordination started to appear at risk.[79]

Secondly, in May 1985, the Lebanese Shiʿi movement Amal, a faction that the whole PLO regarded as an ally until then, attacked the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, marking the beginning of what became immediately known as the "War of the Camps",[80] a conflict that would last until 1987. This aggression, which Syria approved and fostered, was aimed at liquidating the Palestinian armed presence in west and south Beirut so that Amal could emerge as the faction asserting Lebanese control over those parts of the capital. In doing so Amal would have been able to present itself as the Shiʿi partner of a tripartite agreement, signed in Damascus, involving Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the new leader of the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF), Elie Hubayqa, supposed to put an end to the civil war and reassert Syrian influence in the country.[81]

A third element further complicating the position of the PLO leadership, especially on the international level, was the series of operations carried out by several smaller Palestinian groups against civilian targets. First, a Palestinian commando killed three Israelis on a yacht in Cyprus on 25 September claiming that they were Mossad agents. This action prompted an Israeli air raid against PLO headquarters in Tunis which killed seventy-three people. Some days later, a group of militants of the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) hijacked the Italian passenger ship "Achille Lauro" heading to Tel Aviv. These events led to a deterioration of PLO-Jordan relations, since the Hashemite Kingdom was undergoing strong Israeli and US pressure blaming Jordan for letting the PLO reorganise its military activities on its soil.[82]

Within this context of serious obstacles, the PNSF's opposition, alongside that of the DFLP and the PCP, contributed to undermining Arafat's

diplomatic agenda as they represented another front that the PLO Chairman had to win in order to advance his goals.[83] From an international perspective he could appear unable to impose the "required" step on a stubborn, pro-Syrian opposition, forcing him, or giving him the pretext, to avoid recognising Resolution 242.[84] In this sense, the PNSF's hard-line opposition did have some form of influence on the PLO leadership.

Nevertheless, factors such as Jordan's vulnerability to American pressure and the ensuing intransigence over PLO "needed concessions"[85] as well as the series of attacks carried out by small groups outside the Middle East probably had more weight in determining the failure of this political settlement initiative.[86] Furthermore, among all the external factors coming into play, it should be stressed that the War of the Camps negatively affected the PFLP too. Its leaders could not but feel embarrassed when the country they labelled as the main regional supporter of the Palestinian "nationalist" line ordered the military and political destruction of the PLO presence in Lebanon. All these aspects should lead to the conclusion that, although part of the factors causing the end of the diplomatic initiative, the PFLP's policies had a limited impact.

Beyond the political impasse that the PFLP experienced in this phase, the unviability of the PNSF's framework reflected the strong presence at this stage of the opposition-integration dilemma. The PFLP's attachment to the PLO framework clashed with the Syrian-controlled factions' goal of putting the organisation under Damascus' full control. Although the PFLP had compromised the DA due to its rejectionism, a couple of years later it was not prone to disengage totally from the PLO mainstream. In fact, the efforts that the PFLP spent to unify the PLO after 1985 would demonstrate its prioritisation of integration within the PLO and protection of its autonomy.

From the Collapse of Hussein-Arafat Coordination to PLO Reconciliation: Unity Overrides Opposition

With the de facto end of the Amman agreement, the PFLP's priority of compacting the PLO resurfaced. The PFLP's line throughout the intra-Palestinian dialogue that followed the collapse of Arafat's Jordan option signalled that despite a hard-line rhetoric, Habash's faction was more than willing to moderate its opposition in order to ensure PLO unity.

As the obstacles to Arafat's diplomatic strategy multiplied, his efforts to salvage the framework of negotiations with the United States and the collaboration with Jordan did not succeed. In an effort to reduce the negative effects of the recent attacks on European targets, Arafat announced in Cairo the "PLO's refusal of all act of terrorism" and reaffirmed its opposition to armed operation outside Palestine.[87] Nevertheless, the PLO Chairman's main achievement after 1982, namely the Amman agreement, was definitively compromised. A year after its signing, King Hussein announced the end of political coordination with the PLO. In his speech, Hussein pointed to the PLO's lack of commitment to the agreement as the main cause for this disruption since this behaviour deprived any diplomatic initiative of the necessary credibility. Through these words, the King was highlighting the PLO's unwillingness to shift position on the UN resolutions.[88]

All these events represented positive developments for the PFLP and the other PNSF factions, although the deterioration of Hussein-Arafat relations was not really the result of a change in the PLO leadership positions. The PFLP saw the crisis of PLO-Jordan relations as validating its analysis and arguments. For instance, the Cairo declaration proved that the PLO leadership had embarked on a path that could only lead to further concessions. In the PFLP's view, it represented a significant step preceding the total relinquishment of armed struggle and the acceptance of UN Resolutions 242 and 338, as demanded by Jordan on the United States' behalf.[89]

Retaining such a sceptical attitude towards Fatah, the PFLP reacted cautiously to Hussein's abrogation of his coordination with Arafat. First, the King's speech did not entail that Fatah would automatically reverse the policies it had been pursuing for more than four years. This was telling of Fatah's adherence to the peace process and of its leaning towards "American solutions" for the region, notwithstanding the de facto end of the negotiation process and the PLO Executive Committee's declaration charging US intransigence with the responsibility for the failure.[90] Furthermore, the PFLP interpreted Hussein's announcement as a step aiming at taking the initiative and imposing the Amman agreement as "the base to strengthen his position to the detriment of the PLO". This was paralleled by Jordan's efforts to expand its influence in the West Bank through the support of personalities outside the PLO, such as the Mayors of Ramallah and Nablus, linked to the Jordanian regime and likely to promote its line.[91]

Given this phase of remarkable disarray for the PLO leadership, the opposition factions were presented with the opportunity to renew their initiative. The collapse of the Amman agreement was not the only aspect encouraging a more radical agenda since several factors, specifically related to the OPT, represented arguments in support of a return to a "nationalist line". First, since summer 1985, the new Israeli national unity government had introduced harsher measures to curb resistance activities in the West Bank and Gaza, the so-called Iron Fist policies. In particular, Israel started to target leading figures within the Palestinian national movement in the OPT, such as student and trade union representatives as well as journalists. Significantly, these policies were conceived within a new plan to administer the OPT which would include closer coordination with the Jordanian Authorities.[92] As evidence of Israeli-Jordanian coordination, on the one hand King Hussein launched a five-year investment plan for the OPT, a "velvet glove" coupling with the Israeli Iron Fist.[93] On the other, he started to hold secret meetings with the Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in order to set the base for direct negotiations between the two countries. Although the talks were never upgraded to formal negotiations due to a negative vote by the Israeli cabinet on their start, these moves and contacts signalled Israel and Jordan's will to marginalise the PLO in the OPT.[94]

All these risks made the need for a return to a unified Palestinian initiative even more urgent, but the internal Palestinian debate and confrontation appeared to follow the same pattern observed throughout the 1980s. The DFLP and the PFLP manifested their interest in opening dialogue with Fatah shortly after King Hussein's speech, and started to hold meetings with Arafat's faction.[95] The PFLP joined the debate from its viewpoint of alternative opposition and the logic it adopted was the same as that marked the confrontation with Fatah before the 17th PNC: the achievement of some preconditions as base for talks and the parallel retention of a hard-line profile. These preconditions were mainly Fatah's official abrogation of the Amman agreement and the end of its relations with Egypt, the restatement of the national political programme as "issued by the legitimate PNC sessions" and the implementation of a collective democratic leadership capable of avoiding the "individualism which plagued" the PLO during the mid-1980s.[96] Echoing the slogans launched throughout the previous years, the PFLP called for the creation of the "largest Palestinian national gathering" as a mean to pressure the PLO leadership to relinquish the Amman agreement. Interestingly, as it signalled the

intention to achieve reconciliation, while the PFLP still adopted a more intransigent position vis-à-vis other Palestinian factions, nonetheless it started to moderate its demands concerning Fatah leaders. For instance, it gradually stopped calling for the "substitution of the deviant leadership", stressing instead the need for its retreat from "deviant positions".[97]

Despite the "objective conditions", as the PFLP defined the collapse of Hussein-Arafat coordination and the new Jordanian policy towards the OPT, allowing and requiring PLO reconciliation actually emerged, the path to achieve it was not completely smooth.[98] The PFLP's determined adherence to its preconditions sparked criticisms from the DFLP which was engaged in an intense series of meetings with Fatah's Central Committee between Moscow and Tunis. The DFLP's Secretary-General Nayef Hawatmeh labelled the PFLP positions as "hesitant, petit-bourgeois" and not serving the cause of unity.[99] In rejecting these criticisms, the PFLP pointed at Fatah's procrastination concerning the abolition of the Amman agreement. The refusal to take this measure was due, according to the PFLP, to the predominant idea within Fatah that since the Middle East became an American area of influence no solution could be conceived outside US-imposed standards. This explained Fatah silence even in the face of some "major dangerous developments" such as Shimon Peres' visit to Morocco and, in particular, King Hussein's decision to close twenty-five Fatah offices in Jordan. Therefore, the abrogation of the Amman agreement and the closure to further contacts with Egypt represented the only guarantees of PLO return on its "nationalist, anti-imperialist, natural line".[100]

Despite the sharp tone of the declarations and the exchanged accusations which would suggest a continuing impasse, the internal dialogue was progressing. While not taking part directly in Fatah-DFLP-PCP talks in Tunis, nonetheless the PFLP did participate, clarifying through its mouthpiece its positions and replying to the statements issued after every round of negotiations, something that the Palestinian political arena had not seen for several years.[101] Another element suggesting the progression of PLO internal dialogue was the publication of a joint PFLP-PCP statement in November 1986, and afterwards of another document issued in January 1987 by the "three democratic forces", namely the PFLP, the DFLP and the PCP. The significance of these statements was not in their content so much as in the PFLP's return to more consistent coordination with the PLO moderate opposition forces actively involved in dialogue with the PLO leadership.[102] Finally, Habash's visit to Czechoslovakia and then

directly to Moscow were telling of the PFLP's approval of and participation in the initiative started by the new Soviet Communist Party Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev, which aimed at achieving PLO unity while renewing a Soviet role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.[103]

The major perils threatening the PLO were still present at the beginning of the new year. In the OPT, Israel's Iron Fist policy continued unabated while Palestinian camps in Lebanon had still to endure months under the siege imposed by Amal during the last phase of the War of the Camps. In light of this situation, in February and March intra-Palestinian consultations intensified with talks going on in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. The whole PLO was directly concerned and summits among the different Palestinian factions were paralleled by meetings between Palestinian leaders and official representatives of the countries hosting the talks, such as the discussions that George Habash held with Algerian President Chadli Benjedid and Libya's Mu'ammar Gaddafi.[104]

A breakthrough was finally achieved during two particular meetings which led to the drafting of two "political documents". These documents signalled the readiness of all the Palestinian forces to proceed towards the convocation of the 18th PNC. First and foremost, the "Tunis document" signed by Fatah, the DFLP and the PCP on 16 March 1987 called for the formal abrogation of the Amman agreement, removing the last meaningful obstacle to reconciliation. Indeed, the document also set a date for the start of the new PNC session, precisely on 20 April, to be preceded by a ten-day-long comprehensive dialogue.[105] A week later, the PFLP and the DFLP re-joined the most radical factions such as the PF-GC and Fatah-Intifada, for a meeting held in the Libyan capital Tripoli. The concluding statement of the talks basically echoed the points announced in the Tunis document. Both statements also envisaged some organisational reforms, such as the inclusion of the PCP within all the PLO bodies and a significant opening to a possible inclusion of the pro-Syrian former rebel forces.[106]

Finally, after the PLO Executive Committee abrogated formally the Amman agreement on 19 April,[107] the PNC opened its week-long sitting. The resolutions of the assembly reflected the impasse that the PLO went through between the end of 1982 and 1987. In effect, the only concrete result was the formal PLO leadership's dismissal of its strategy of coordination with Jordan. Concerning all other aspects, and especially the political agenda, this session was very close to the 16th held back in 1983: the PLO reaffirmed its adherence to the peace plan endorsed by the Arab

countries in Fez in 1982, while stating again its positive stance vis-à-vis an international peace conference. The PNC also asserted the PLO's rejection of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and excluded the idea of confederation with Jordan; it also referred to the 16th session concerning relations with Egypt, namely affirming that contacts with the Mubarak regime should be proportionate to his relinquishing of the Camp David accords.[108]

As the PNC concluded its works, the PFLP expressed its full satisfaction with the results achieved: the "gates leading to Amman and Cairo" were finally closed and the four-year lost unity was found again. The PFLP saluted the reassertion of the "nationalist line" as its own achievement, since the stands and policies it adopted throughout this phase of division demonstrated to what extent it contributed to the preservation of a Palestinian position challenging America and its supporters' solutions for the region. There were no more obstacles now to full reconciliation with Syria and to the revival of a resistance axis capable of counterbalancing the "reactionary" regimes which failed to impose their policies on the PLO.[109]

Notwithstanding the laudatory noise following the 18th PNC, the PFLP's agency throughout the PLO split reflected contrasting features. Significantly, the inability to set up a radical alternative within the PLO institutions and legal framework underscored the overall weakened position of the PFLP in the post-Beirut period. At the same time, the processual character of its decline emerged clearly in the mid-1980s, as the PFLP managed to retain some political weight and popularity by adhering firmly to the defence of PLO independence in the face of Syrian interference.

Conclusions

The PLO crisis of the mid-1980s unfolded gradually but nonetheless produced unprecedented levels of internal fragmentation. Acting in an increasingly divided and internationally penetrated political framework, the PFLP started to experience its own dilemma stemming from contrasting priorities. The PFLP's challenging purpose was building a radical alternative to Fatah's pressing diplomatic strategy while ensuring the unity of the PLO forces: the PFLP aimed at being a hard-line opposition to Arafat's agenda but one loyal to the PLO institutions and legality. These arose as the bases of the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma which would in turn become the main source of serious policy fluctuation.

The PLO Chairman's intention to pursue a rapprochement with Amman and Cairo against the backdrop of the Reagan plan appeared clear since late 1982. However, the PFLP's initial choice was never to break totally with the "rightist" leadership but rather to maintain adherence to the PLO as the main platform to pursue its own goals. Such orientation was reflected in the PFLP's gradual and reactive estrangement from Fatah which followed the pace of Arafat's subsequent steps in the implementation of his plans. Fatah's infighting and visit to Cairo, the unilateral convocation of the 17th PNC in Jordan and finally the signing of the Amman agreement were all milestones in Arafat's diplomatic thrust. The harshness of the PFLP's rhetoric and positions towards the PLO Chairman escalated accordingly.

The PFLP's pursuit of coalition politics responded to the necessities of such reactive and loyal opposition to Fatah. A leftist coalition was intended as a counterweight to the imposition of autocratic and majority politics, an alternative force capable of preserving consensual decision-making. The PFLP, spearheading the coalesced Left, saw itself as the responsible actor, protecting the PLO revolutionary line based on the primacy of armed struggle, the uniqueness of its role as Palestinian representative and the rejection of "liquidatory" peace plans. Building a leftist alternative pole while prioritising the cohesion of the PLO led the PFLP's agency to oscillate constantly throughout the mid-1980s, thus undermining its credibility and effectiveness. The PFLP's rhetoric fluctuated between calls for Arafat's ousting and renewed recognition of the PLO Chairman as the "common denominator" guaranteeing Palestinian unity. This appeared clearly both in the period between Arafat's visit to Cairo and the signing of the Aden-Algiers agreement and between the announcement of PLO-Jordan coordination and its collapse.

The opposition-integration dilemma also plagued relations between the PFLP and its coalition partners. Notwithstanding its overall loyal opposition to Fatah, the PFLP supported a more confrontational approach towards Arafat than the other main leftist forces, particularly the DFLP. Hawatmeh's faction adopted softer positions towards Fatah by virtue of their historical proximity and the DFLP's long-standing support for political solutions. PFLP-DFLP divergences emerged significantly during the intra-Palestinian dialogue that led to the Aden-Algiers agreement.

Aiming at more concessions from the PLO Chairman, the PFLP hesitated concerning the implementation of the agreement, contributing to the breakup of the DA experience. Furthermore, the PFLP miscalculated Arafat's resolve to pursue his diplomatic strategy and probably did not expect his readiness to summon the PNC without a comprehensive consensus.

Besides internal PLO differences, the PFLP's partnership with the Syrian regime represented a further source of pressure, and ultimately of fluctuation. While the PFLP's rapprochement with Syria responded to the need to set up a regional counterbalance to Arafat's Jordan option, Damascus' goals were at odds with the PFLP's adherence to PLO independence. In this context, Syrian pressures concerning the re-inclusion of the NA's forces within the PLO played a paramount role in determining the PFLP's hesitations in the wake of the Aden-Algiers agreement. Moreover, the Syrian proxies' consistent commitment to oust Arafat militarily undermined any effective coordination of opposition factions within the PNSF. The PFLP's inclusion in the PNSF appeared mostly circumstantial, while other factions and Syria sought to set up a real challenge to Arafat and the PLO status quo. These differences pushed the PFLP back closer to the PLO mainstream, especially after Syria supported a second military assault on Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

The interplay among this sum of factors resulted in the PFLP's inability to influence significantly the global orientation of the PLO between 1982 and 1987. Even though Arafat's agenda was finally unsuccessful, the PFLP's role in that failure was fairly limited. This phase thus signalled a step in the PFLP's marginalisation process in which the opposition-integration dilemma and the policy fluctuation pattern manifested clearly. But at this stage, loyalty to the PLO platform still had some positive repercussions, underscoring the processual character of the PFLP's marginalisation. The PFLP's final commitment to defending the PLO from external threats allowed it to retain a degree of credibility among Palestinian militants and population that the pro-Syrian rebel factions never enjoyed. However, the implications of the opposition-integration dilemma had also a regional dimension: while the pursuit of a hard-line opposition stirred division within the Palestinian fold, adherence to PLO autonomy would prove incompatible with the strategic goal of the PFLP's regional partners.

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CHAPTER 3

Imagining an "Axis of Resistance": The PFLP's Foreign Policy in the Mid-1980s

Introduction

The goal of forming a counterweight to Arafat's post-1982 diplomatic strategy went beyond the boundaries of internal PLO politics and informed the PFLP's foreign policy priorities. The PLO leadership's leanings towards Arab conservative regimes and the United States were to be ideally matched by an opposed alignment of the Palestinian Left with regional and global "anti-imperialist" forces, namely Syria and the USSR. While the coalition of the leftist opposition had to resist Arafat's "deviations" from PLO nationalist consensus, building an "axis of resistance" with the Syrians and the Soviets was fundamental to obstruct the US-backed "liquidatory" plans. The shared opposition to the Reagan peace plan and the May 1983 Lebanese-Israeli agreement seemed to provide strong bases for the PFLP's alignment with Damascus and Moscow.

However, if the PFLP's foreign policy orientations reflected its goals on the internal front, they would also soon reflect its dilemmas and contradictions. Syrian and Soviet respective priorities would exacerbate the PFLP's fundamental quandary between opposition and integration in the PLO platform. The persistence of Damascus' hegemonic aims towards the PLO and Moscow's Cold War calculations proved that this "axis of resistance" remained only an imagined possibility, with no actual implications. The PFLP strived to accommodate the policies of its designed allies, especially Syria's, within its narrative and political initiative. However, faced with Syrian-backed aggressions to the PLO, the PFLP's line fluctuated between

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opposition to Arafat's diplomatic agenda and the defence of Palestinian autonomy. The PFLP hesitated but ultimately shifted from alignment with Damascus to siding with Fatah and the DFLP in the common defence of Palestinian military and political independence. This final act of loyalty to the PLO platform, while underscoring its dilemma, would indeed save the PFLP from the irrelevance affecting pro-Syrian Palestinian forces in the coming years. While Syria's clients disavowed the PFLP's idea of regional alignment, Soviet transition from inaction to rapprochement with Israel made clear that a USSR-Palestinian strategic collaboration would not be possible. In three-year time, the PFLP's foreign agenda thus appeared based on short-term interests and instrumental ties, losing all viability and credibility to Palestinian eyes.

The PFLP's predicament on the regional and international stages highlighted the marginalisation of its overall political agency. As the PLO repelled successfully the threats to its autonomy while bridging its internal rifts, the PFLP was left pondering about the impotence of its action. Only some change in the paradigms of its policies could allow a renewal of the PFLP's role and the outbreak of an unprecedented uprising in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) would provide not only the PFLP, but the whole national movement with such opportunity.

Regional Developments and Internal Shifts: The Bases of Alignment with Syria

Coordination with Syria was quite a new element in the PFLP's foreign policy of the mid-1980s that would not have appeared evident a decade earlier. The rapprochement started to emerge in the late 1970s and was finally consecrated after the 1982 Lebanon War when the PFLP decided to relocate its headquarters to Damascus. The alliance between Syria and the PFLP was forged upon their rejection of Arafat's diplomatic strategy and his dialogue with Jordan and Egypt. Moreover, Damascus and the PFLP opposed the bilateral Lebanese-Israeli negotiations held under US patronage. Both these post-1982 developments represented an advancement of the American agenda for the region aimed at achieving a global peace settlement through separate stages, a road map that loosely corresponded to Israel's concept of peace.[1]

The success of these two tracks of the peace process would have marginalised the PFLP and the political discourse it bore within the PLO. The

Assad regime, for its part, would have found itself more isolated on the regional level if Lebanon and Jordan reached separate peace agreements with Israel, under US influence.[2] The Lebanese-Israeli peace talks also threatened the PFLP and Syria militarily, since a successful outcome would have led to a withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. While representing a setback for Damascus, this amounted to an existential threat for the remaining Palestinian and specifically PFLP guerrillas still based in Lebanon. Since the independence in military activity once enjoyed in Lebanon was no longer possible in any of the countries surrounding Palestine, the PFLP was aware that protecting what was left of the Lebanese sanctuary and of the "Palestinian right to bear weapons" there would ultimately determine its survival during the phase following the loss of Beirut.[3]

Although Syria and the PFLP looked close in the wake of the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon, this had not always been the case. From its foundation and during the first half of the 1970s, the PFLP was very critical towards the so-called nationalist military regimes such as Syria or Egypt. These states were "tactical allies" in the battle against Israel and imperialism, but at the same time, their failure to prioritise the Palestinian method of long-term guerrilla warfare represented a serious obstacle in what the PFLP considered the only path towards liberation. Furthermore, in the PFLP's view, the "petit-bourgeois elites" governing these states had started to forge alliances with the middle and upper bourgeoisie in their respective countries and, as a consequence, started to lean towards "retreatist positions", favouring a political settlement of the conflict with Israel. In this phase, the comprehensive revolutionary project of the PFLP was in contradiction with the reformist attitude of these regimes.[4] Concerning Syria in particular, its intervention alongside Maronite militias to the detriment of the PLO and the Lebanese Left in 1976 seemed to have put it definitively within the enemy camp. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, however, some major shifts in the regional balance of power occurred, contributing to PFLP-Syrian détente which was to be bolstered by the consequences of the PLO expulsion from Beirut.

The signing of the Camp David agreements and the Iraqi attack on Iran, both in 1979, deprived the "anti-imperialist camp" of two prominent actors. The separate peace treaty between Egypt and Israel thwarted the Syrian goal of reaching a comprehensive settlement involving all the actors and fronts of the conflict. Consequently, the Syrians needed to counterbalance the Egyptian move and changed their positions towards the Palestinian factions. Taking into account developments in the Lebanese

situation, with Israel's 1978 Litani operation and its growing role as "protector" of the Christian rightist factions, it was clear that new conditions for a Palestinian-Syrian rapprochement emerged on different fronts.[5] More specifically, the PFLP's view concerning regional alliances excluded completely any linkage with "reactionary regimes" and once Iraq also became an active member of this camp because of its attack on Iran, it was left with little choice in terms of regional partnerships.

Besides these changes on the Arab level, some shifts in the PFLP's internal currents also contributed to the emergence of an alliance with Syria. Until the Fourth National Congress of the PFLP held in 1981, a group headed by, among others, *Al-Hadaf* editor Bassam Abu Sharif and the PFLP's Executive Committee member Abu Maher Al-Yamani, occupied a dominant position within the Front. This group was closer to Iraq and, in general, favoured the maintenance of good relations with Fatah as well as a more moderate view on the PLO leadership's increased leaning towards a diplomatic strategy. Conversely, another group led by the PFLP Deputy Secretary-General Abu Ali Mustafa and Abu Ahmad Fouad, head of the Military Department, supported greater coordination with Syria and the end of relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. According to As'ad AbuKhalil, during the Fourth National Congress, Abu Ali Mustafa's group gained strength within the PFLP. This happened partly because of George Habash's inability to halt their advance despite his views differed radically from those of his Deputy. Indeed, the PFLP Secretary-General was not historically on good terms with the Syrian regime and did not want to adopt an excessively harsh position regarding Fatah's political strategy. Therefore, his failure to deter Abu Ali Mustafa's group might be interpreted as a sign of weakness for Habash; this was probably due to the brain surgery he underwent in Beirut in 1980, which limited both his physical and intellectual capabilities.[6]

However, according to some former and current PFLP cadres, a major internal split over Syria did not occur. While different points of view existed, these were treated adequately and the whole PFLP aligned with the position issued by the Politburo. Possibly, reluctance to acknowledge such divisions still affects those who were directly involved, but more than two decades of distance, the death of the two main leaders and looser affiliation to the PFLP today increase the trustworthiness of such considerations.[7] This suggests that the PFLP's decision to align itself more closely with Syria was mainly due to its calculations of the changed regional

balances and the new situation within the Palestinian national movement, with internal rifts taking a more marginal role.

Internal shifts apart, convincing the Palestinian popular and militant base about the new stand towards Syria was a hard task: many among the Palestinian population and within faction militants, PFLP included, still resented Syria because of its involvement in the 1976 Tell al-Zaatar massacre[8] as well as because of its poor performance in confronting the Israeli army's quick advance to Beirut in summer 1982. To do so, the PFLP resorted to its accustomed categories inherited from Mao Tse-Tung's analysis of Chinese society, namely his theory on primary and secondary contradictions.[9] By virtue of this theory, the contradictions still existing between Syria, the PFLP and, in general, the PLO appeared secondary in the light of the situation that emerged after the Lebanon War. The PFLP started to call for a "scientific understanding" of the divergences with Syria, on the base of "common interests", first of all the rejection of the new "liquidatory peace plans"[10] as well as concern over new Israeli aggressions towards Syrian and Palestinian positions in Lebanon and Syria itself.[11] The danger of an Israeli-Lebanese agreement, the end of Egypt's isolation and Jordanian plans for the West Bank represented the "primary contradiction" between the "imperialist camp" and the "revolutionary nationalist" one. Therefore, the contradictions between the Syrian regime and the Palestinian revolution as a whole became secondary and priority had to be given to "correcting" relations with Syria.

Presenting the Viability of Alliance with Syria

Throughout the months that followed the PLO eviction from Beirut, the PFLP and Syrian interests in Lebanon came closer. The PFLP stressed the common opposition to Lebanese-Israeli peace to bolster its agenda of counterbalancing Arafat's contacts with Jordan and Egypt. In the PFLP's narrative, shared interests in Lebanon represented a solid base for strategic coordination with the Assad regime and, at the same time, a viable alternative to the PLO leadership's agenda.

On 17 May 1983, Lebanon and Israel reached an agreement after several months of negotiations under US supervision. The accord entailed the withdrawal of Israeli troops as well as the end of the state of war between the two countries.[12] Although the text of the agreement did not contain any reference to Syria and the PLO, the Israelis immediately specified that their army would pull out of the country only on condition that

Syrian and Palestinian forces withdrew first.[13] In turn, the Syrians, while rejecting the agreement, posed the same precondition before ending their military presence in the neighbouring country, asking for a preliminary Israeli withdrawal. Consequently, the implementation of the agreement reached an impasse the very same day it was signed.

For the PFLP, the ostensible success of American diplomacy in engineering a Lebanese-Israeli agreement represented the definitive inclusion of the Lebanese authorities, particularly the Phalangist President Amine Gemayel, within the Camp David strategy, of which the new agreement represented the "second step".[14] Nevertheless, while this development was seen as an "escalation" of the threats against Palestinian interests, a positive facet was that the agreement appeared to have bolstered the cohesion of the "Lebanese nationalist camp".[15] A meeting held in Zgharta among Lebanese forces opposing the accord with Israel opened up the space to establish a "broad Lebanese nationalist front", a possibility to which the PFLP looked with interest.[16] The PFLP's interest lay in presenting the viability of a "radical option" in Lebanon, namely, the possibility of establishing an opposition front relying on armed struggle to impede the implementation of the Lebanese-Israeli agreement. Such a front, necessarily aligned on Syrian positions, paralleled the project of building an opposition coalition on the Palestinian level in order to deter the realisation of a rapprochement with Jordan. The "lesson" of the Lebanese arena became more important with the foundation of the National Salvation Front (NSF), opposed to Gemayel's diplomatic agenda. The NSF actually continued to be held up as an example after Arafat's visit to Egypt in the wake of his evacuation from Tripoli when, for instance, Abu Ali Mustafa drew a parallel between the PLO Chairman and Gemayel on the one hand and the Lebanese and Palestinian opposition on the other.[17]

In the PFLP's understanding, the Lebanese-Israeli agreement paved the way to including Jordan in the "table of negotiations", as the third part of the Camp David strategy.[18] Therefore, the PFLP tried to exploit opposition to the agreement as a rallying cry, stressing the extent of the security threat it posed for Syria but also for Palestinians living in Lebanon. Furthermore, the PFLP repeatedly highlighted the successes scored by Lebanese and Palestinian guerrilla operations against Israeli troops in the Beqaa, reporting growing tensions within the enemy authorities concerning Israeli permanence in West Lebanon. Accordingly, it indicated armed struggle as the only way to topple the agreement and bring about a unilateral Israeli withdrawal.[19] Throughout the second half of 1983, in the

PFLP's narrative, the escalation of military operations against occupying forces as well as the resistance of "Lebanese nationalists" in repelling the Phalangist attack in the Mount Lebanon region were parts of the same fight against the implementation of the American peace settlement.[20] Moreover, the redeployment of Israeli troops, withdrawn from the Chouf in September, and the direct involvement of US soldiers alongside Gemayel's forces during clashes with "Lebanese nationalists"[21] showed respectively the effectiveness of the "radical option" and the continuous necessity to improve and upgrade coordination among Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese Nationalist forces, clearly facing a common threat.[22]

Eventually the Lebanese government and President Gemayel renounced the 17 May agreement with Israel, cancelling it due to Syrian pressure and the impossibility of implementing an accord de facto requiring a simultaneous Israeli and Syrian withdrawal from the country. The PFLP saw such a development as confirmation of its arguments. The threat of a second victorious result for the American-Israeli camp managed to bring together a wide spectrum of forces which, despite their ideological differences, believed in the importance of preserving Lebanon's sovereignty and integrity vis-à-vis Israeli hegemonic policies and occupation: the cancellation of the agreement proved definitively the effectiveness of military and political coordination with Syria. In addition, for the PFLP, guerrilla warfare proved once again to be the best option to confront Israeli military superiority as continued pressure pushed the Israelis to a partial unilateral withdrawal. Finally, the "victory" in Lebanon represented a blow to Palestinian "deviationists" as well. Their assumption that in the wake of 1982 Lebanon War the "key to conflict resolution" was only in American hands proved false.[23]

To a certain extent, the PFLP's analysis was correct as Syrian manoeuvring in the country, especially through its Lebanese and Palestinian allies, appeared successful. The setbacks that Phalangist and Lebanese Armed Forces endured against the PSP and Amal militias demonstrated that Gemayel was not able to implement a settlement deal for the Lebanese crisis without Syrian consent. As a result, the PFLP felt emboldened about its choice of alliance with Syria.[24] Moreover, the failure of the Lebanese-Israeli agreements also demonstrated American misjudgement of the situation in Lebanon. The Reagan administration enforced an agreement without considering that, despite the setback of the 1982 Israeli invasion, Syria still had the power to thwart its implementation.[25]

The ultimate invalidation of the Lebanese-Israeli peace treaty, as well as the development of the civil conflict, provided, according to the PFLP, hard evidence of the effectiveness of coordinating with Syria. However, pursuing shared goals in Lebanon also entailed the reappearance of underlying contradictions between the PFLP and the Assad regime.

The Backlash of the Alliance with Syria: Returning Contradictions

The evolution of the Lebanese scenario demonstrated that the PFLP and Syrian interests converged to a significant extent in that country. Consequently, Syria emerged as an effective partner in PFLP advocacy of a rejectionist line vis-à-vis the Lebanese-Israeli agreement. However, such convergence over Lebanon clearly did not entail an automatic coincidence of interests and priorities on other fronts, especially concerning the Palestinian internal arena. On that level, the resurfacing of inconsistent goals was a source of tension that fostered the negative pattern of policy fluctuation.

The Syrian regime had been trying repeatedly to assert its control over the PLO in order to acquire more leverage within the regional confrontation with Israel, especially as Sadat's Egypt headed towards a separate peace with Tel Aviv in the second half of the 1970s.[26] If this was the case before the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the situation did not change considerably after 1982. As in the first years of the Lebanese Civil War, the Syrian regime was still eager to take over the reins of PLO politics in order to fully control "the Palestinian card", acquiring greater military, diplomatic and therefore bargaining weight in relation to its American and Israeli adversaries.[27] To pursue this goal, President Assad needed to weaken and possibly remove Arafat from the PLO leadership since his policy of openness towards the United States was, for Syrian interests, as dangerous as the 17 May agreement. Therefore, once the threat of a peace agreement asserting Israel's hegemony on Lebanon was definitively repelled, Syria could turn its attention more confidently to the PLO and act to counter Arafat's agenda more resolutely. For this reason, when some Fatah military officials located in Lebanon decided to rebel against the PLO Chairman in summer 1983, Syria intervened on their side and provided massive military support.[28]

For its part, the PFLP supported the Fatah rebels' call for reform of the PLO structure and decision-making process, and for the relinquishment of Arafat's diplomatic path. The PFLP hoped that playing mediator between the opposing forces would gain it increased weight within the PLO and the possibility to tip the balance of power with the PLO Chairman, restraining him from heading closer to Jordan and the United States. However, with the escalation of military confrontation at the end of summer 1983, and as Syrian will to end the existence of an independent PLO in Lebanon became manifest,[29] the PFLP found itself in a complicated position. While it was denouncing the risks of Jordan's interference in the PLO affairs and the subsequent loss of independence, the PLO leadership was under the attack of Syrian-proxy Palestinian factions whose goal, notwithstanding the possible legitimacy of underlying arguments for their actions, was the creation of an alternative PLO.[30] Like the other main Palestinian factions forming the core of the PLO, the PFLP historically refused to settle intra-Palestinian feud by military means and prioritised preserving the Palestinian national movement independence vis-à-vis the Arab regimes.[31] Therefore, if on the one hand it shared the criticism of the Fatah leadership on which the revolt was based, on the other, it could not afford to endorse the settlement of intra-Fatah division through military means.[32] Moreover, the Syrian ally was disavowing painfully the PFLP's claim that the "nationalist regimes" were qualitatively different from the "Arab reaction".[33] Once again Syria demonstrated that it was ready to resort to military means to get rid of Palestinian armed presence, similar to Jordanian actions in 1970–71. However, the PFLP could not disavow the narrative it had advocated since the PLO evacuated Beirut; consequently, it tended to downplay the regional dimension of Fatah infighting and Syrian involvement, stressing instead the faults of the "deviationist" leadership which ultimately were at the origins of the crisis. Consequently, the PFLP, alongside the DFLP, focused on the need for change within the PLO and while the clashes intensified the two organisations issued their "Program of Unity and Democratic Reform". Because of this unclear position, the PFLP was accused of remaining culpably neutral, if not siding with Syria and the Fatah rebels in their attack against Arafat.[34]

After the climax of the crisis was reached with the siege of Arafat and his loyalist forces in Tripoli, PLO mainstream forces finally evacuated the town at the end of December 1983. The Syrian-backed aggression, and the PLO Chairman's ability to build an effective resistance, increased his popularity among the Palestinian public and militants: instead of

weakening his leadership, the Syrian strategy reinforced Arafat's grip on the PLO, moved the criticisms of its governance to the background and ultimately pushed him towards an even more individualist attitude in his policy-making, as in the case of his unprecedented visit to Cairo.[35]

The PFLP's lack of concrete action reflected the status of a faction divided between the interests of the new regional ally and the genuine concern for preserving Palestinian political independence. This division existed within the PFLP itself as Habash and the older leadership were more concerned with the defence of the PLO vis-à-vis Arab interference, while the pro-Syrian group led by the Deputy Secretary-General was more resolute in its support of Assad and the Fatah rebels' campaign against Arafat.[36]

This problem resurfaced some months later when again Syrian interests and pressure pushed the PFLP towards an impasse which undermined the credibility of its proposed agenda. In June 1984, the leftist opposition and Fatah signed the so-called Aden-Algiers agreement, intended to implement the reconciliation of the PLO after the Chairman sparked a major break because of his meeting with Egypt's Mubarak. The pact included the acceptance of some important demands raised by the opposition, however, the PFLP maintained an intransigent position, demanding the inclusion of the Fatah rebels in the reconciliation process envisaged by the Aden-Algiers agreement. This position eventually contributed to the de facto fall of the intra-Palestinian agreement and gave Arafat further ground to pursue his diplomatic strategy.[37] Clearly Syrian pressures played a central role in the PFLP's insistence on the return of the rebels to the PLO fold. It would be otherwise difficult to understand why the PFLP gave much importance to these marginal elements within the Palestinian national movement,[38] towards whom Arafat expressed his utmost disdain and with whom he rejected the option of dialogue.[39] Furthermore, Habash was personally responsive to internal split and secession, as the PFLP had been the first Palestinian faction to experience fragmentation; consequently, he remained closer to Arafat's understanding of the situation.[40]

However, the conclusion of Fatah infightings did not entail the end of the confrontation between the PLO Chairman and Syria, hence the PFLP's dilemma persisted. The situation escalated in 1984 with Arafat's unilateral convocation of the PNC in Amman and with the signing of the agreement for diplomatic coordination with King Hussein in February 1985. These moves also aggravated the PLO internal split, pushing the PFLP closer to the rebels' position and to Syria, as the formation of the

Palestine National Salvation Front (PNSF) demonstrated. Nonetheless, the contradictions between the PFLP and Syria which had emerged in 1983 were about to resurface in full strength in 1985. That year, the Palestinian factions in Lebanon faced open aggression at the hands of the Shiʿi Amal movement which enjoyed full Syrian backing and whose goal was to wipe out the Palestinian armed presence from southern and western Beirut. In fact, the outbreak of the conflict saw a de facto PFLP shift from alignment to opposition to Syria's Lebanese and Palestinian agendas.

The War of the Camps: The Outbreak of PFLP-Syrian Contradictions

In 1985, several developments reconfigured the Lebanese scenario in terms of power balances, both on the level of the different Lebanese factions and the external forces involved in the conflict. In the wake of events such as the fall of the Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement, the redeployment of Israeli troops and sectarian clashes between Druze and Christians in the Mount Lebanon region, Syria recovered the setbacks endured during the 1982 Israeli invasion.[41] Increasingly, the main Lebanese factions started to look at the Assad regime as the only actor capable of engineering an agreement among them and stabilising the country. In this context, the Druze PSP, the Lebanese Forces (LF) which now led the Christian camp and the Shiʿi Amal movement were the pillars of the Syrian strategy to impose a settlement in Lebanon.[42] The main obstacle to this goal was the Palestinian armed presence in Beirut refugee camps and the south which threatened Amal hegemony in those areas. Furthermore, since spring 1985 Fatah started to build up its presence in order to reassert control over Palestinian-inhabited areas, a development which worried Syria still in very tense relations with the PLO Chairman.[43]

After trying to impose its hegemony by establishing checkpoints to control movement in and out of the Palestinian camps, in June Amal finally launched an attack on Sabra, Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh camps in Beirut, assisted by the predominantly Shiʿi Sixth Brigade of the Lebanese Army. This aggression, which was to last for three years, received a green light directly from Damascus and Amal continued to enjoy Syrian verbal and military support throughout the whole War of the Camps, one of the bloodiest phases of the Lebanese Civil War.[44]

The start of the War of the Camps also marked a qualitative development in the re-emergence of PFLP-Syrian contradictions. Unlike during Fatah infighting, in this new round of armed clashes, the Palestinian forces in Lebanon were under attack from an external group whose ties with the Syrian regime were all the more clear. As a consequence, the PFLP, now coalesced with Syrian proxies within the PNSF, strived at the same time to appease the situation, preserve its nationalist credentials by denouncing Amal's actions and minimise Syrian involvement. In such a context, the contradictions affecting the PFLP's agency emerged distinctly in parallel to the resulting policy fluctuation. Syria, seen in the PFLP's agenda as its main partner in the fight against the conflict settlement project, gave undisputable confirmation of its hostility towards Palestinian independent action. Consequently, the PFLP's historical adherence to an independent PLO gradually overrode its oppositional priorities. Within such a predicament, the PFLP's line fluctuated between on-the-ground, military coordination with fellow Palestinian factions and alignment with Syria on a political level. As a result, its action to dull the conflict, and regain a certain political leverage at least on the Palestinian level, proved impotent. Ultimately, this reflected the PFLP's process of marginalisation, although its on-the-ground realignment with the PLO mainstream enabled the PFLP to avoid the almost total irrelevance affecting the Palestinian Syrian proxies.

Making Sense of the War of the Camps, Seeking Broader Legitimacy

As a first response to the War of the Camps, the PFLP tried to provide an interpretation of the events alternative to both Amal and Fatah's. In doing so, the PFLP aimed at disassociating Syria from Amal's hegemonic logic while emerging as a potential Palestinian partner capable of restoring security in the Beirut camps. The PFLP hoped that such a role could bring broader legitimacy both on the Palestinian and regional levels.

When the clashes erupted, the PFLP seemed to have a clear understanding of what was happening. In its view, Amal's aggression against the camps was not simply another outburst of violence caused by an isolated episode,[45] but fitted into a wider plan to "redraw the political map" of Lebanon. Unexpectedly, the PFLP dismissed Amal's claims that the attack aimed at liquidating "Arafat's gang" because of its role in hindering Syria's

effort to stabilise Lebanon. Notwithstanding the deep split with Fatah, the PFLP affirmed that the War of the Camps was simply Amal's attempt to impose its hegemony on south-western Beirut and southern Lebanon, thus allowing a sectarian reorganisation of the country. To this purpose, the presence of a force fighting for a secular, "national and democratic Lebanon", like the whole PLO, had to be eliminated. For this reason, the PFLP considered the agenda of the Shiʿi faction as in line with Israeli and Maronite projects for Lebanon.[46]

Notwithstanding the recurring reference to an Israeli conspiracy, ultimate explanation for all negative developments in the Lebanese Civil War, the PFLP's account was not very far from reality. However, in the first phases of the confrontation with Amal, the PFLP avoided making any reference to Syria's role, despite Damascus' clear intervention in support of Amal and notably, despite Habash himself having left the Syrian capital shortly after the beginning of the clashes, fearing retaliation by the government.[47] In addition, the PFLP tried to maintain a perspective that saw the War of the Camps as a situation endangering the Palestinians, the Lebanese "democratic" forces and Syria to the same extent. Pointing to the new Shiʿi-Maronite axis as evidence, the PFLP stated that Amal's attempt to impose its supremacy on southern Lebanon and, more generally, on the Muslim community served the Israeli goal of securing those areas from which the Israeli army had pulled out.[48]

This version of the events was deliberately diffused to downplay Syrian involvement but was far from being a credible explanation. First of all, it reflected a misunderstanding of changes in the balance of power within the Christian camp. In fact, the rise of the LF to the detriment of the Phalangist movement, and in particular the assertion of Elie Hobeika's prominence within this faction, corresponded to a rapprochement with the Syrian authorities and signalled a certain disenchantment with Israel's capability to settle the Lebanese conflict.[49] Moreover, it was very unlikely that the PFLP leadership had forgotten Amal's favourable position towards the 1976 Syrian invasion of Lebanon. Similarly, the PFLP's top leaders could not ignore the inextricable relationship between Amal and the Assad regime, as the latter provided armaments and training at the inception of the military activities of the Shiʿi movement and immediately transformed it into a vehicle of its interests in the country.[50] Such a position was evidently not tenable, especially once PFLP militias started to fight alongside Fatah and DFLP fighters. At the end of May, Habash released an interview to Radio Monte Carlo where he acknowledged the current moment of

crisis between the PFLP and Syria. He went even further when, commenting on a previous statement affirming that Amal's aggression could not have taken place without a "green light", he did not exclude the possibility that this green light was coming directly from Damascus. At the same time, any speculation on a rapprochement with Arafat was excluded. In the midst of the deep rift caused by the Arafat-Hussein agreement, Habash affirmed that while "Amal was perpetrating the military slaughter of the Palestinian revolution, Arafat had already slaughtered it politically".[51]

With the main regional ally backing a deliberate attempt to eliminate the Palestinian armed presence from Lebanon and the main internal rival taking the lead of the Palestinian resistance, the PFLP's position was extremely delicate. In this precarious context, the PFLP tried nevertheless to draw some positive results from the War of the Camps. It aimed at presenting the PNSF, the coalition formed with Palestinian pro-Syrian factions to oppose Arafat-Hussein coordination, as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian nationalist line. In the PFLP's rhetoric the coalition was entitled to represent the PLO more legitimately than Fatah, and therefore held the necessary credibility to negotiate a political solution to the current crisis.[52] Throughout the first month of clashes the PNSF supported the idea of a negotiated settlement of the conflict through the reformulation of Lebanese-Palestinian relations. By adopting this position, the PNSF aimed at meeting Amal and other Lebanese factions' desire to prevent a return to the pre-1982 situation, when the PLO forces, especially Fatah, were accused of "excesses" in imposing their control in Lebanese-populated areas.[53] The PNSF also claimed regular contacts with the Lebanese National Democratic Front (LNDF), in particular Jumblatt's PSP, to demonstrate its commitment to a broad and comprehensive solution. At the same time, the PNSF continued to mark its difference with Fatah's leadership, affirming that unity on the battlefield did not equal a renewed political unity.[54] The peak of this PNSF attempt to gain wider legitimacy was the signing of the "Damascus agreement" with Amal and the LNDF which was supposed to end the War of the Camps definitively. The Syrian-brokered agreement entailed Amal's withdrawal from areas surrounding the Palestinian camps, ending the siege which was starving the civilian population of Sabra, Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh. The security of the camps would still be under Palestinian responsibility, but the PLO militiamen were only allowed to retain light weapons and had to surrender heavier armaments. But the most remarkable among the terms of the Damascus agreement was that all of Syria, Amal and the LNDF recognised

the PNSF as the legitimate Palestinian representative until the "return of the PLO on its declared political program", namely until the relinquishment of any diplomatic initiative pointing towards negotiations. Finally, a series of Coordination Committees was set up jointly among all the parties to ensure the agreement's implementation.[55] The ceasefire determined by the Damascus agreement was warmly welcomed by several opposition Palestinian factions.

Nevertheless, the majority of the Palestinian fighting forces involved in the War of the Camps, belonging to Fatah and the DFLP, were not satisfied with the formulation of the agreement. Jamil Hilal, the DFLP's spokesperson at the time, declared that the agreement represented a danger on several levels. The PLO adversaries, namely the Syrian and the Lebanese authorities, could exploit the recognition of the PNSF to deepen the divide within the Palestinian fold and use it to claim the "annulment of previous agreement between the PLO and the Lebanese government guaranteeing the [Palestinian] right of self-administration and self-defence". The DFLP made clear that while its criticism of Arafat's conduct remained valid, it also rejected the PNSF line of action, pointing in particular to the pro-Syrian factions' responsibility in exposing the PLO to military aggression.[56] Such position marked a difference with the PFLP, highlighting again the DFLP's easier prioritisation of PLO cohesion over its opposition stances.

However, both the PNSF's bid for broader legitimacy and the consequent intra-Palestinian polemic were short lived. The Syrian regime and its client experienced a serious setback when their Lebanese and Palestinian allies, and notably the PFLP, did not remain neutral as wished. This did not entail renunciation of the goal of liquidating the "Arafatist" PLO leadership from Beirut and bringing the opposition more securely under Syrian patronage. In this framework, Syria replenished Amal's arsenals and provided both the movement and the Lebanese army with dozens of tanks. At the end of August, aggressions against the Beirut Palestinian camps started again, exposing the ephemeral nature of the Damascus agreement.[57]

The re-ignition of violence proved the unfeasibility of the PFLP's line to settle the Amal-PLO conflict. The middle ground adopted between Amal and the PLO leadership brought little leverage on the situation to the PFLP and did not lend it wider influence as an effective mediator and responsible Palestinian force. Rather the untenable balance between

conflicting partners fuelled the PFLP's policy fluctuation which contributed to marginalise its agency also on the Lebanese stage.

The Persistence of the War of the Camps

The continuation of the conflict between Amal and the PLO represented the final evidence that the PFLP's regional goal of correcting PLO-Syrian relations could not be achieved. Moreover, further attempts that the PFLP made to play some role in appeasing the conflict through the PNSF underlined its oscillations on the political and diplomatic levels, among the actors involved. This highlighted again the relationship between the contradictions experienced, policy fluctuation and political marginalisation.

The scepticism of other Palestinian factions and the failure to implement effectively the Damascus agreements due to Amal's rearmament and its continuous siege of the camps proved that both its allies and enemies did not consider seriously the PNSF's claim to represent the Palestinian people. On the one hand, Amal and Syria's concern for the renewed power of Fatah and the Palestinian loyalists in Lebanon increased over time after the alleged end of the hostilities. On the other, Arafat, after the fall of his coordination agreement with King Hussein of Jordan, decided to boost Fatah's military presence in the Palestinian camps in order to further hinder Syrian settlement efforts and gain some political advantages on the regional and international levels. In this context, he occasionally ordered a re-ignition of the conflict with Amal and contributed to its spread all over the Lebanese South, in the Sidon and Tyre areas.[58] The PFLP and other factions forming the PNSF were stuck in the middle. The PFLP continued to voice its adherence to the Damascus agreement and to the formula of the Joint Committees to ensure a durable ceasefire until the final restoration of the "Syrian-Lebanese Nationalist-Palestinian alliance".[59] In this framework, Habash's organisation alternated criticisms and condemnation towards Amal and the PLO leadership, blaming the latter for giving an excuse to Amal with its "deviationist policies", while occasionally showing signs of openness to the Shiʿi movement and Syria.[60]

The evolution of the war continued to show the huge difficulties that the PFLP was facing in its attempt to play an active role in solving the crisis. Such difficulties were first reflected in the PFLP's adherence to the half-hearted attempt to find a political solution to the conflict. The support for this uncertain political line contrasted with some correct interpretations of the War of the Camps that the PFLP outlined. Its analyses and

statements continued to highlight the hegemonic and sectarian character of Amal's policies that lay behind claims concerning the need to expel Arafat's gang and disarm the Palestinian factions, thus securing the Lebanese South. The PFLP also underlined, to a more limited extent, the significance that the War of the Camps had for Arafat, exposing his interests in exacerbating tensions with Syria and in manipulating the conflict to compact his grassroots consensus. Amal's exaggerated accusations, according to which "Arafat was behind any movement and accident occurring in Lebanon, fostered the conviction that he and the Palestinian people [were] the same". Instead of fighting Arafat's deviations, this was reinforcing them in the PFLP's view.[61]

However, once more the PFLP was unable to implement effective action following a mostly correct analysis. The conflict with Amal peaked again in October 1986 when the Shiʿi movement led by Nabih Berri decided to besiege the Rashidieh refugee camp, near Tyre. While denouncing Amal, the PFLP did not renounce negotiation with the movement through Syrian mediation. Despite commitment to a political solution as the "sole possible one", voiced by the leadership in Damascus, the PFLP's military officers in Lebanon decided to join the battle alongside Fatah and the DFLP, contravening the current line of the leadership.[62] The line of the PFLP's Politburo was to focus on diplomatic contacts with Syrian officials and leaders of the Lebanese National Forces, such as the PSP or the Popular Nasserist Organisation (PNO). These efforts were meant to convince Lebanese partners to increase their pressure on Amal, ultimately isolating the movement and forcing it to lift the siege on the Palestinian camps.[63]

Such diplomatic efforts had little chance of succeeding. The unfolding events demonstrated the inability of the PNSF to speak for the whole Palestinian national movement. Within the Palestinian camp, the Fatah-PLO leadership was the only group with real control on the development of the conflict. In addition, despite Syria's alleged insistence on supporting a new PNSF-led PLO, Amal did not consider it a force capable of guaranteeing a favourable political agreement. Consequently, as the PFLP itself lamented, Amal never complied with the different settlement proposals.[64] Furthermore, none of the Lebanese factions involved in the conflict was able to enforce a ceasefire on Amal, despite the PSP now involving itself in the military confrontation with Berri's movement. The Syrian regime looked at the generalised conflict ravaging Beirut and South Lebanon with growing concern. Since the attempt to eradicate the PLO not only failed,

but risked backfiring and jeopardising Syrian hegemony on Lebanon, Assad ordered Syrian troops to enter West Beirut in February 1987 to reinstate stability in the capital.[65]

The PFLP welcomed the Syrian intervention as a promising act, providing the right framework to end the bloodshed of the War of the Camps.[66] However, the redeployment of the Syrian army did not entail an immediate end to Amal's siege. Initially, Syria refused to force the Shiʿi movement to withdraw its fighters from the Palestinian camps. The regime still demanded the end of Arafat's command over the PLO and seemed to confirm its support for the PNSF leadership.[67] Finally, at the beginning of April, Amal and the PNSF signed a new ceasefire agreement and Syria decided to enforce its implementation, putting an end to the six-month long siege.[68] As the first trucks loaded with food and medical aid entered the camps, the PFLP expressed its confidence in the success of this ceasefire, unlike previous cases when it voiced its lack of trust in Amal.[69]

Besides the huge costs in terms of lives lost and gratuitous violence inflicted on civilian populations, the War of the Camps was also a bitter political experience for the PFLP. First, notwithstanding the call for restoration of the "triangle of the resistance", there was no hope of recreating any sort of genuine PLO-Syria alliance. Anti-Syrian sentiment grew exponentially during the conflict, even within the PFLP which could not but disagree with the Syrian line and tacitly follow the PLO leadership.[70] Syria had repeatedly emerged as the fiercest enemy of the Palestinian armed and independent presence in Lebanon. In addition, the War of the Camps was a further occasion for Arafat to demonstrate and strengthen its control over the PLO. The PFLP had been unable to broker a durable end to the clashes through PNSF negotiation with Amal, Syria and the "Lebanese Nationalists". Every time Fatah was excluded or did not give its support, ceasefire agreements broke down, as in the case of the 1985 Damascus agreement. This reflected the weakness of the coalition created by the PFLP due to a lack of sufficient popular and militant support even in the country where it was supposed to be stronger. More generally, the developments of the War of the Camps evidenced the link between policy fluctuation and ineffective agency. The PFLP espoused a narrative that shared some of the motives animating Amal while denouncing the real goals of the Shiʿi movement. Moreover, while on the diplomatic level the PFLP kept contacts with both Damascus and Amal, on the ground the PFLP's forces were aligned with the PLO mainstream. The full emergence of

PFLP-Syrian contradictions therefore entailed the ultimate failure of the PFLP's agenda on the regional level.

The only positive aspect emerging from the War of the Camps was the PFLP's preservation of a certain degree of political autonomy. Unlike the pro-Syrian factions, the PFLP never accepted Amal's claims of "fighting the Arafatist gang" to justify its attacks and sided with the rest of the PLO even when this meant contravening Syria's will. Although later if compared to the DFLP, the PFLP ultimately stressed the importance of Palestinian "unity on the ground", shielding the PLO from Amal's attempts to foster infightings within the Palestinian camp.[71] The adoption of such position was a confirmation that the PFLP rejected PLO internecine military confrontation and, above all, prioritised the defence of PLO independence and of Palestinian armed presence over the divisions and the political competition with Fatah. This allowed the PFLP to retain its credibility among the Palestinian public unlike the pro-Syrian factions which experienced a definitive marginalisation.

The final PFLP alignment with fellow Palestinian factions also underscored the processual and gradual nature of its decline. Indeed, despite the PFLP's shift in its orientations and the maintenance of an ambiguous line throughout the conflict in the camps, the final decision to side with the PLO mainstream brought some benefits in terms of political capital. Therefore, although generally negative, the effects of the PFLP's policy fluctuation were more limited at this stage.

The USSR and the PFLP in the Mid-1980s: Limited Rapprochement

Throughout this period, the Soviet Union and its alleged support for national liberation movements worldwide played a specific role in the PFLP narrative. Beyond the tangible policies implemented by the USSR to back the Palestinian cause, the PFLP needed to depict a compact image of the "anti-imperialist camp" in order to bolster its radical alternative to Arafat's diplomatic strategy. In a phase wherein the United States were asserting their hegemony over the region through a possible successful outcome to the Lebanese-Israeli agreement and the emergence of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian representation ready to negotiate under US patronage, the protection of the USSR's role and prestige in relation to the Palestinian national movement became a priority for the PFLP. Habash's

faction also needed to counterbalance US influence on growing sectors of the PLO as well as to disavow the assumption that the Americans were the only party with the "key to a solution of the conflict in their hands", an assumption that enjoyed increasing consensus within the PLO, especially at the level of the Chairmanship. Hoping for the creation of a Palestinian-Syrian-Soviet axis capable of countering American and Arab projects for a settlement, the PFLP called for the defence of the USSR's image and denounced all attempts to "discredit the commitment of the Socialist Bloc" which "served the acceptance of imperialist plans".[72]

In practical terms, an improvement of PFLP-USSR relations seemed at hand due to the post-1982 political developments that risked marginalising the Soviet Union's role in the region. In addition, Arafat's contacts with the United States apparently opened space for more frequent contacts between Moscow and the PLO Left, especially with the formation of leftist opposition coalitions. However, long-standing Soviet interests and policy pattern towards the Palestinian national movement and the Middle East posed a major obstacle to strategic collaboration with the PFLP. The ostensible PFLP-USSR concurrence in the post-1982 phase seemed based on tactical interests rather than long-term ones. In fact, Soviet late Cold War calculations risked disavowing the analysis of global and regional power balances that the PFLP put forward in the mid-1980s.

A Reluctant Ally: Overview of PLO, PFLP-Soviet Relations

The development of the PFLP's relations with the Soviet Union after 1982 was affected by long-standing paradigms that marked the USSR's orientation towards the PLO as a whole and to the individual Palestinian factions. At the same time, the PFLP's agency and the political narrative it espoused as a national liberation movement throughout its course continued to influence both its view of Soviet involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as its direct contacts with Moscow. The core aspects distinguishing Soviet-Palestinian relations since the late 1960s continued to influence the PFLP's connection with the USSR in the post-Beirut phase, despite a certain convergence of interests.

Unlike Israeli-American relations, the PLO never enjoyed consistent support from the Soviet Union. Soviet backing for the Palestinian national movement grew gradually over time but did not reach the level of strategic

entente that distinguished the approach of all US administrations towards Israel.[73] Initially, when the armed organisations took over, there were significant differences between the PLO's and USSR's views on the Arab-Israeli conflict and how to settle it.

The USSR was among the first countries to recognise the State of Israel shortly after its establishment. Furthermore, the Soviets always supported the idea of a political solution, starting from the 1947 UN partition plan. When between the late 1960s and early 1970s the Palestinian factions were on the rise, the USSR did not hesitate to define their reliance on guerrilla warfare as "reckless" and neglectful of the numerous "forms and methods of struggle" at their disposal.[74] The Soviet approach towards the Middle East historically favoured relations with established governments rather than liberation movements.[75] This was a consequence of the Cold War logic that dominated Soviet policies in the area. More precisely, the USSR's approach towards national liberation movements, and the PLO was no exception, was mainly instrumental. Soviet priority was exploiting the relationship with the PLO to gain influence in the region rather than establishing a strategic alliance or deeper coordination as happened in the case of several regimes. This tactical nature of PLO-USSR relations explained the fluctuation of Soviet positions towards the Palestinians and the frequent changes in their line according to the contingent situation.[76] By virtue of this principle, the Soviets started to upgrade their relations with the PLO more convincingly in the mid-1970s, when Egypt, in the wake of the October war, started to seek a rapprochement with the United States. Such a shift was meant to counterbalance Sadat's turn towards the United States and from it stemmed Soviet diplomatic support for the PLO Chairman's bid for international recognition in the second half of the 1970s.[77] By the same token, the Soviet Union failed to provide direct military support to the PLO during Israel's siege of Beirut in summer 1982, fearful that the escalation of the conflict and greater Syrian involvement would lead to superpower confrontation.[78]

Soviet relations with the PLO Left were not smooth either and the PFLP's adherence to Marxism-Leninism never facilitated contacts between the two parties. First, the PFLP's complete rejection of a political settlement to the conflict represented a major obstacle to steady coordination with the USSR. The PFLP's long-term goal of escalating guerrilla warfare against Israel in order to tip the balance and drag the Arab states into a regional and decisive confrontation with the enemy was unacceptable to the Soviets. The clear Maoist influences in the PFLP's ideology were not

seen favourably in Moscow, which preferred establishing regular contacts with Fatah, not only for its larger representation in the PLO and control over it, but also for the pragmatic approach that led its policies.[79] The USSR pushed the Arab Communist parties of several countries to dissolve in order to join the official regime party, as for instance in Egypt, and often favoured the creation of direct links between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the regime ruling party as a way to expand Soviet influence. If Soviet leaders preferred to have direct contacts with ruling parties rather than with smaller, though fully aligned, communist movements throughout the Arab world,[80] it is no wonder that they had outstanding problems in dealing with the highly fragmented reality of the PLO and thus favoured the PLO leadership as their main partner.

The PFLP, while clearly enumerating the Soviet Union within the "friendly camp" at the forefront of the "fight against US-led imperialism", usually preferred to forge ties with the representatives of "international liberation movements" worldwide. This attitude was first highlighted in the PFLP's strategy texts that put the Palestinian revolution within the context of the global struggle against imperialism and capitalism.[81] More significantly the PFLP became renowned internationally for its networks of cooperation with a wide range of Marxist movements relying on the use of political violence, such as the Japanese Red Army (JRD), with whom it carried out several joint operations and whose fighters were often trained in the PFLP's camps.[82] Furthermore, especially in its first decade of activity, the PFLP did not refrain from criticising Soviet stands on the Arab-Israeli conflict and their reluctance to upgrade relations with the PLO. As a consequence, the PFLP, in line with other Palestinian factions, often turned to the Chinese who were more willing to provide military assistance to the Palestinian resistance in the context of Sino-Soviet competition, as well as having a closer position on issues such as the role of armed struggle or the UN resolutions concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict.[83]

In the light of these major differences, forging closer connections with Moscow appeared a complicated task for the PFLP. Such underlying divergences represented a fundamental weakness in the PFLP's foreign policy agenda in the mid-1980s.

Tactical Convergence, Strategic Distance

In the aftermath of the 1982 PLO eviction from Beirut, the USSR reached one of its lowest points in terms of influence and successful initiatives both in the Arab world and the wider Middle Eastern region. The Soviet Union appeared paralysed in its Arab policies, in particular in its treatment of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The causes of such inaction are to be sought in several factors. First, the Soviet foreign agenda was busy with the occupation of Afghanistan, invaded in 1979, where Soviet troops were experiencing growing difficulties in facing the staunch resistance of local forces. The decision to invade in order to topple Hafizullah Amin's regime caused widespread disapproval throughout the region, significantly affecting the USSR's prestige in Arab and Muslim countries.[84] In addition, the Soviet leadership was also concerned by the increasing challenge posed by the Solidarity movement in Poland, weakening Soviet grip on the East-European country. Furthermore, in more general terms, the last years of Leonid Brezhnev's rule and Andropov and Chernenko's tenures were characterised by an ageing CPSU Politburo which lacked a clear understanding of Soviet foreign policy priorities and contributed to the stagnation of the USSR's position in the Arab world.[85]

In this context, Soviet popularity was also running low within the Palestinian national movement. Many, especially at the level of the PLO leadership, disapproved the USSR's inability to provide material and effective support during the siege of Beirut and were thus convinced that the United States was the only superpower with real leverage in the region.[86] The PFLP was concerned by this turn and the growing popularity of the Reagan peace plan. Therefore, from the 1983 16th PNC, the PFLP expended efforts to defend the image of the Soviet role in Palestinian affairs. For instance, in justifying the USSR's lack of initiative during the Lebanon War, the PFLP fully aligned with Soviet propaganda that stated that limited Moscow support for the Palestinian resistance was due to the lack of a common Arab line and strategy capable of facing Israeli aggression:[87]

> we did not expect a Soviet ground intervention to save the Palestinian revolution and the Lebanese National Movement. (…) We were aware that the effectiveness of Soviet support was dependent upon an appropriate Arab background.[88]

The limited Soviet involvement in Middle Eastern affairs in the wake of Brezhnev's death was reflected also in the USSR's main goal of preserving a role in the diplomatic settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict that appeared closer. Conversely to the PFLP's rhetoric, the Soviets were mostly concerned at being excluded by American activism and would have welcomed a peace plan securing their role. Consequently, Arafat's attempts to open a dialogue with the Reagan administration worried Moscow, which in turn could find only in the PFLP and other opposition factions an adequate rejection of the US peace plan. Nevertheless, this did not bring about immediate closer coordination with the Palestinian Left, and indeed the Soviets tried to cultivate relations also with the Jordanian regime, at the forefront of "Arab reaction" according to the PFLP, in order to preserve their influence in the region.[89]

However, Moscow's negative stand towards the US-sponsored Lebanese-Israeli agreement of May 1983 let the PFLP hope that it would be able to gain more direct Soviet support and notably exploit the Soviet position to pursue its rejectionist agenda within the PLO. Both the USSR's decision to replenish Syrian arsenals, stepping up its military assistance to the Assad regime, and the clearly voiced opposition to the 17 May agreement[90] encouraged the PFLP that its line would find a positive echo regionally and internationally.[91] A further encouragement stemmed from the USSR's praise for the formation of the PFLP-DFLP Joint Command in June 1983, especially in light of the feud that was escalating within Fatah. As the Soviets looked with concern on the development of Abu Musa's rebellion against Arafat, the formation of a unified leftist platform was a positive development.[92] The leaders of the Joint Command were received by the Soviet Ambassador to Syria in Damascus shortly after the establishment of the unified leftist leadership. The PFLP and the DFLP glimpsed the possibility of upgrading the status of the Palestinian Left vis-à-vis the USSR, thus receiving wider international recognition and possibly greater material support.[93]

Nevertheless, Moscow's outstanding difficulty in addressing Fatah's crisis and the Syrian-backed rebellion would not help the development of the PFLP-Soviet relations. On the one hand the USSR, disappointed at Arafat's rapprochement with the United States, approved to a certain extent the rebels' claims, closer to the PFLP's position on the matter. On the other, the Soviet Union opposed the idea of a radical PLO under total Syrian tutelage. A Syrian-controlled PLO would curtail Moscow's leverage as well as representing a serious obstacle to the success of a political

settlement with the USSR's participation. As a consequence, an unclear Soviet position, just like the stand displayed by the PFLP, further diminished its influence within the PLO leadership and contributed in driving Arafat more convincingly towards the Reagan Plan.[94]

Afterwards, the PFLP tried to stress Soviet material support for all initiatives aiming at Palestinian reconciliation and at the correction of relations with Syria, but the ensuing events were to demonstrate that such support did not imply a shared view with the PFLP.[95] Indeed, while Moscow looked with favour on the signing of the June Aden-Algiers agreement between Fatah and the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Soviet leadership released in July a new proposal for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The plan did not differ much from the Fez or Brezhnev plans and it appeared in fact based on them. But the USSR stated the right of the future Palestinian State to "determine the character of its relations with the neighbour countries, including the possibility to form a confederation", in a clear allusion to the project of a Palestinian-Jordanian confederated state that both Arafat and King Hussein seemed to pursue.[96] While the PFLP could have accepted the idea of an international peace conference at which the USSR and United States would enjoy the same "supervising" status, Habash's organisation had consistently opposed the idea of association with Jordan considered as a "deviation", that would endanger the PLO status of sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.[97]

The failure of the Aden-Algiers agreement, Arafat's unilateral convocation of the 17th PNC in Amman and the agreement for joint work signed between the PLO Chairman and King Hussein were to show the lack of viable coordination between the Palestinian Marxist opposition and the Soviet Union, if not a deeply different point of view. Certainly, the Soviets were disappointed by Arafat's decision to de facto put the PLO on the path traced by the Reagan administration but they were equally reluctant to support the PFLP's hard-line and foster a deeper rift within the PLO.[98] The USSR was possibly dissatisfied with the demise of the DA, to which the PFLP's intransigence contributed predominantly. Such a move could not but foster PLO fragmentation and strengthen the pro-US trend within the Palestinian national movement. The USSR reportedly did not urge the opposition to boycott the PNC, although it later endorsed such position, and more significantly did not want the Palestinian Left to join any Syrian-sponsored opposition coalition, namely the PNSF.[99] The PFLP's decision to join the PNSF underlined the extent to which Syrian pressure had a

greater weight on the PFLP than Soviet influence. It could hardly have been otherwise, since while the PFLP was mainly operating politically and military in areas under full Syrian control, the USSR never showed the will to grant greater assistance to the Palestinian leftist opposition, offering the latter more options in such a delicate game of balances. The PFLP tried to present Soviet rejection of the Arafat-Hussein agreement as an implicit endorsement of the PNSF but, failing to find any appropriate statements by Soviet officials, it relied on comments made by political analysts of the regime press. Nevertheless, even those signalled their opposition to Arafat's flirtation with the United States rather than support for the PFLP's line, evidencing the lack of Soviet interest in the PFLP's agenda.[100]

When Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in March 1985, the legacy of the Brezhnev era came to an end. After initial continuity, the new leader changed attitude in pursuing the main Soviet interests in the Middle East, such as avoiding exclusion and countering US peace initiatives.[101] The main axes of the USSR's policies were the exploration of new options to ensure Soviet influence over the region and the cultivation of relations not only with radical regimes, as had been the case until then, but also with conservative countries. Consequently, the Soviets after almost twenty years sought to re-establish minimum contacts with Israel, while also tried to improve relations with pro-US regimes like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf petro-monarchies.[102] When it came to the Palestinians, the Amman agreement still worried the Soviet Union and, besides that, the outbreak of the War of the Camps posed an additional dilemma: for the second time, Syria was trying to eradicate definitively the pro-Arafat Palestinian groups. As during the Fatah rebellion, the Soviets were unwilling to see the PLO becoming a Syrian client despite shared criticisms of Arafat's orientation towards the United States that also provided the pretext for Amal aggression on the camps. As a result, the USSR renewed its neutral stance and called for an immediate end to the clashes.[103] The PFLP, stuck between the opposing sides, appreciated the USSR's stand as it seemed to confirm the position it expressed through the PNSF.[104] The PNSF also tried to underline the shared view with the Soviets, sending a reminder to the "national liberation movements and the socialist countries" in which it condemned both the Amal aggression and Arafat's deviations in a bid to gain greater international visibility.[105]

Nevertheless, while the War of the Camps continued unabated for three years, the Soviet Union focused its Palestinian policies on cancelling the Amman agreement. The announcement in February 1986 of King

Hussein's withdrawal from his diplomatic coordination with Arafat encouraged the Soviets to pursue more actively their goals. The Soviets showed their commitment in this sense by hosting the talks between Fatah, the DFLP and the PCP in the Czech capital Prague. Indeed, the direct, sustained involvement of the PCP in the talks since shortly after Hussein's withdrawal signalled Soviet interest in achieving the reconciliation.[106]

The PFLP reacted enthusiastically to the renewed Soviet diplomatic activism which was mobilising several "friendly regimes" such as Algeria and South Yemen. In the PFLP's view, the USSR was actively backing the restoration of PLO unity on its "nationalist, anti-imperialist basis" as advocated by the PFLP itself and this was a main linchpin of its wider Middle Eastern strategy to counter US policies in the region.[107] However, while celebrating Soviet commitment to Palestinian reconciliation, the PFLP seemed to neglect the USSR's parallel interest in achieving a rapprochement with Israel. While in other historical phases this would have provoked PFLP outrage, in such a critical period, when Arafat's abandonment of the Amman agreement was at hand thanks to Soviet pressure, USSR-Israel contacts became secondary.

Soviet involvement in intra-Palestinian dialogue did not end with the announcement of the cancellation of the Amman agreement in March 1987.[108] Indeed, in the middle of the 18th PNC held in Algiers, the Soviet Ambassador to Algeria, Vasily Taratura, had to intervene to mediate a dispute between Habash and Hawatmeh on the one hand and Arafat on the other.[109] The disagreement was over the definition of PLO-Egyptian relations: the PFLP had already underlined its desire to cut contacts with the "Camp David regime" but the PLO Chairman was unwilling to close all of his doors to Cairo.[110] Thanks to Soviet mediation, the two parties reached an entente and agreed to define relations with Egypt according to the resolutions adopted at the 16th PNC session which made contacts with Cairo conditional on its withdrawal from the Camp David framework.[111] Thus, by April 1987, Soviet-Palestinian relations ostensibly regained their pre-1982 status. Nonetheless, his failures would not lead Arafat to abandon his US-centred diplomatic strategy, nor Gorbachev would dismiss the pillars of his Middle Eastern policies during the last years of the USSR. As the PLO internal crisis came to an end, the PFLP did not succeed in capitalising Fatah's estrangement from Moscow, leaving its relations with the Soviets virtually unchanged.

The evolution of PFLP-Soviet relations in the mid-1980s and of Soviet Middle Eastern policies during this period demonstrated that contacts between the parties did not experience substantial improvement. The USSR's adoption of positions closer to the PFLP line appeared as a by-product of its main policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than the result of a specific political line. In several cases, the USSR's policies and stances contradicted PFLP discourse on Soviet involvement in the Middle East, jeopardising its vision of building an effective opposition to Fatah. Beside this, the result of the PFLP's agency hindered the chance for a real upgrade of relations with the USSR. The collapse of leftist coalitions, in which policy fluctuation played a direct role, eliminated a potential platform for closer working relations with the Soviets. While Soviet policies did not play a direct role in the PFLP's policy fluctuation, this negative pattern affected its linkages with Moscow.

Conclusions

By early 1987, as the PLO emerged intact after years of deep internal split, the PFLP's imagined "axis of resistance" with Syria and the USSR demonstrated having little if no tangible meaning at all. The foreign policy chapter of the PFLP's radical alternative to the PLO leadership showed its unviability and lack of influence both on the Palestinian and regional levels. This irrelevance paralleled the limited influence of the PFLP's initiative on the internal arena.

The rapprochement with Syria, which started in the late 1970s and accelerated following 1982 as the PFLP relocated its offices in Damascus, was based on a temporary concurrence of interests. Syria's clear opposition to Arafat's diplomatic agenda and its active role in undermining the 1983 Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement hinted, in the PFLP's view, to the effectiveness of such a radical axis. Syrian positions seemed to substantiate the PFLP's case for the "correction" and renewal of Syrian-Palestinian relations, as an alternative to Arafat's increasing contacts with Jordan and Egypt. Nonetheless, the persistence of fundamental contradictions ended up showing how illusory the idea of a cohesive, radical alignment with Damascus was. Syria quickly demonstrated that its opposition to Arafat's "deviation" in fact amounted to toppling the PLO Chairman militarily and placing the PLO under its own tutelage. By supporting Fatah rebels and Amal, Syria de facto waged a proxy war against Palestinian armed organisations throughout most of the mid-1980s. Stuck between Syrian

aggressive policies and Arafat's autocratic pursuit of his diplomatic strategy, the PFLP saw its opposition-integration dilemma worsening. The credibility of its action was in question as its line and rhetoric fluctuated between condemnations of Arafat's "political slaughter" of the PLO and denunciations of Syria-backed military aggression on the national movement. The inefficacy of the PFLP's course of action was clear in its attempt to present the PNSF as the guardian of Palestinian nationalist legitimacy. The little recognition it received from both other Palestinian factions and Syrian proxies in Lebanon proved the marginalisation of PFLP-led initiative. The ultimate decision to side with fellow Palestinian organisations as the Amal aggression had been under way for several months salvaged the PFLP's legitimacy among Palestinian militants and public. Unlike the DFLP, the PFLP hesitated before making this choice but nonetheless, loyalty to the PLO seemed to repay at this stage.

The impact of Soviet policies on the PFLP was more limited if compared to Syrian actions, but it nonetheless contributed to weaken its post-1982 initiatives. The pursuit of Soviet fundamental interests in the Middle East, namely avoidance of superpowers confrontation and involvement in the political settlement of regional conflicts, ultimately invalidated the idea of a global backing to the PFLP's radical option. The USSR's engagement in increased contacts with the Palestinian Left was circumstantial, dictated more by instrumental calculation rather than ideological affinity. Arafat's steps in the path of the Reagan peace plan risked marginalising the Soviets seemingly pushing Moscow on rejectionist position. Thus, the PFLP had hard time defending Soviet credibility in Palestinian eyes as the USSR did not intervene to stop the Syrian-backed war on the refugee camps. The prioritisation of relations with Damascus showed the strategic importance of Syria for the USSR and the tactical dimension of contacts with the PLO. This was made even clearer by Soviet effort to re-establish diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv under Gorbachev initiative which went so far as to lift the ban on Soviet Jews' emigration to Israel.

While the attempts to build a radical alignment within the PLO did make some progress, although they ultimately failed, the PFLP's project of Palestinian strategic collaboration with Syria and the USSR was even more short-lived. The "primary contradictions" existing between the PFLP and its would-be allies were too deep-seated thus reinforcing the policy fluctuation scheme and depriving the foreign agenda of all operative relevance. Due to these contradictions, the PFLP could not even find some sort of effective regional and international echo to its arguments, a

condition from which Arafat's image and line benefitted considerably. Being a loyal opponent to the PLO leadership while imagining such an axis of resistance led the PFLP to a deadlock. The adherence to the fundamental principle of protecting Palestinian autonomous action saved some political capital for the PFLP, avoiding, at least for the moment, the political irrelevance that pro-Syrian Palestinian faction would experience in the following years. The evolution of both its Palestinian and foreign agendas demonstrated the shortcomings of the PFLP's course of action, leaving its ability to mount an effective political opposition initiative in deep crisis. Such initiative crisis nonetheless was matched by a general PLO crisis, as its leadership, although strengthening its grip on the organisation, reaped no result from its post-1982 diplomatic efforts. In 1987 the trajectory of the independent, diaspora-based PLO as emerged in the late 1960s reached its most serious impasse. The end of the year, with the outbreak of the First Palestinian Intifada, would show that the PLO hopes of achieving its historical goals lay in the rise to prominence of the national movement within the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Similarly, the generalised popular uprising would provide the Palestinian Left, and notably the PFLP, with a unique chance to renew itself and stop its marginalisation process.

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CHAPTER 4

The First Intifada: Initial Opportunities, Final Marginalisation

Introduction

The outbreak of the First Intifada represented a real lifeline after the deadlocks and divisions that the Palestinian national movement experienced throughout the 1980s. To Fatah and the PLO leadership, the mass uprising of the Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) provided new bases and weight to its diplomatic initiatives. For the PFLP, the factors that brought about the Intifada and the political environment it shaped signalled an unprecedented chance to renew its action and strengthen its weakened standing within the PLO.

The bases for this fresh start were lain during the late 1970s and the 1980s, when the PLO factions deepened and expanded their presence in the OPT. The PFLP, alongside Fatah and the DFLP, asserted its presence within the framework of trade unions and popular organisations. Thanks to this work, the balances existing between the PLO factions in the diaspora were not replicated exactly in the OPT, and when the Intifada began, each of the main factions found equal representation in the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). This pushed the PFLP to refocus its action showing a remarkable ability to adapt to the new priorities set by the movement in the OPT.

With opportunities however came new challenges affecting the long-standing patterns characterising the PFLP's agency. While the opposition-integration dilemma resurfaced in the new phase and took on deeper dimensions, new sources of tension emphasised its main negative effect,

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namely policy fluctuation. Tensions re-emerged after the uprising succeeded, during its first year, in exposing Israel's occupation on a global scale and driving Jordan to abandon its claim on the West Bank. How to respond to Arafat's main track of policies appeared to be again the PFLP's main concern. Consistently with his pre-Intifada agenda, the PLO Chairman sought to exploit the uprising to obtain talks with the United States and Israel. On this issue, the PFLP was again caught between its opposition to bilateral negotiations and early Palestinian concessions and its concern to preserve Palestinian unity.

In addition to this major fault line, the divide between the "outside" leadership and its "inside" base in the OPT further strained the PFLP's political action. Divergences between the exiled leadership and the OPT branch over the policies towards Arafat and the support of the Intifada directly influenced the scheme of policy fluctuation. Moreover, the underlying old guard's concern to maintain its leadership in front of rising OPT cadres further exacerbated the inside-outside divide.

The emergence of Palestinian Islamists and their challenge to the PLO status represented the final factor affecting the PFLP's agency during the First Intifada. Next to the PFLP's shifts concerning its positions towards Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (Islamic Jihad), their rise to prominence questioned the PFLP's oppositional role vis-à-vis Fatah within the Palestinian national movement. During the Intifada early years old dynamics and new sources of pressure resulted in the strengthening of the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma, ultimately transforming the uprising in a landmark of its marginalisation process.

Background to the Intifada: The PLO Penetration in the OPT

The Palestinian national movement in the OPT displayed its own peculiarities that differed from Palestinian political mobilisation in the diaspora. Being on the national soil, the legacy of Egyptian and Jordanian rule and, more significantly, the presence since 1967 of the Israeli occupation shaped the development of Palestinian nationalist activism in the OPT. Between the second half of the 1970s and up to the start of the First Intifada, PLO-affiliated movements entrenched and enlarged their presence in the West Bank and the Gaza Stip. In these years, the national movement acquired those features and spelled out those political priorities

that later influenced the unfolding of the Intifada. These aspects were all the more important as they represented advantages as well as sources of pressure for the PFLP's agency in the context of the First Intifada.

Three decades after the eruption of the First Intifada in the OPT in December 1987, scholarly debate clarified that the uprising was the result of several interplaying factors that prepared the ground for its outbreak and secured its continuation over almost six years.[1] The accident in which an Israeli truck killed four Palestinians provided the spark that set fire to long-standing popular frustration over the increasingly harsh conditions imposed by the occupation and the lack of results after twenty years since the launch of the "Palestinian revolution".[2] Among these factors, PLO political agency aimed at organising and mobilising the Palestinian populace was paramount. It is true that the PLO did not "declare" the unleashing of the popular revolt and that the factions' leaders needed some two weeks to take full control of its activities.[3] However, the efforts expended, mainly by Fatah, the PFLP and the DFLP, to assert and strengthen their presence within the OPT laid down the premises and the infrastructure for a sustained popular uprising.[4]

As the main PLO organisations started developing their presence in the OPT, they joined the restricted, but well-established, action of Palestinian communists. In fact, communist activists pioneered political mobilisation in the OPT, and particularly Palestinian labour organisation, as early as the late 1920s. In doing so, they represented the first political force challenging family-based civil organisation among the Palestinian population. Furthermore, their role was central not only in developing trade unions and Palestinian associational life, but also in ensuring the resilience of such social infrastructure in the face of both Jordanian and Israeli repression. In other words, the Palestinian communist movement contributed significantly in laying the foundations upon which the national movement grew following PLO efforts to penetrate the OPT.[5]

The first explicit PLO attempt to establish direct links with the national movement within the OPT can be traced to a resolution of the 10th PNC session, held in Cairo in 1972. On that occasion, the Palestinian factions called for the mobilisation of "popular masses in the West Bank and Gaza" and stated their "attention for the organisation of the masses within the trade unions". More specifically the PLO endorsed the resistance of Palestinian unionists against the Histadrut's (Israel's federation of trade unions) attempts to enrol Palestinian workers, normalising, in so doing, the occupation.[6] The formation of the Palestinian National Front (PNF) a

year later can be seen as a response to the PNC call. Indeed, the PNF was meant to be the first coordinating body for resistance activities in the OPT as well as the first formal affiliation between the PLO external leadership and local activists. Although its operations had to face tight Israeli repression and several of its exponents faced arrest or deportation, the PNF put into practice many of the resistance tools that the First Intifada would spread and institutionalise. Mass strikes and boycotts were organised successfully during the 1973 October War in support of the Arab armies, aimed at exerting pressure on the Israeli economy, which had started to exploit the cheap Palestinian workforce.[7]

From the foundation of the PNF on, several events underscored the assertion of PLO primacy in the OPT as well as the increasing consideration that the "occupied homeland" enjoyed among the external leadership. During the 12th PNC session, the PLO adopted the so-called interim program that set the tactical goal of "establishing an independent, fighting, people's national authority on any part of liberated land".[8] Such a decision marked the first break within the PLO as the PFLP suspended its participation in the Executive Committee protesting such step. Nevertheless, it can also be considered a landmark in the PLO's gradual acceptance of a two-state solution and a significant shift in its consideration of the OPT.[9] The influence of the PLO continued to increase, scoring a notable result at the 1976 municipal elections. The occupation authorities had decided to organise this round of electoral consultations in an attempt to spur the creation of a Palestinian leadership alternative to the PLO, a long-standing Israeli goal. Nevertheless, the move backfired and, as the PLO decided to support the elections, almost all of its candidates were elected mayors of several OPT municipalities.[10] While the PLO was gaining momentum in the OPT, the PFLP appeared sidelined. The PNF leadership mainly included elements of the Jordanian Communist Party (JCP)[11] like 'Arabi 'Awwad and nationalist personalities linked to the DFLP and Fatah, but nobody connected to the PFLP. Furthermore, by rejecting the interim programme, the PFLP expressed a position that did not resonate with popular consensus in the OPT. The PLO leadership's stated goal of establishing a national authority in the OPT went along with the efforts of the local resistance to build national institutions capable of challenging the occupation's establishment. More broadly, the PFLP's rejection of a two-state solution did not meet the priorities of the OPT local leaders who saw the end of the occupation as their primary goal.[12] This initially marginal role, however, did not prevent the PFLP from

pursuing its own line of action in the OPT. Starting from 1976, the PFLP turned to labour with the foundation of the "Voluntary Work Committee" in an attempt to set up a new union in the OPT out of communist control. The Committee was the first of its kind but did not pose a direct threat to the communists' domination of the labour movement.[13]

Notwithstanding its successes, the experience of the PNF was not to last. The Israeli authorities intensified their repression of political activities in the OPT, especially after the Likud government swept into office in 1977. The deportation and arrest of many nationalist figures critically undermined the PNF network in the territories.[14] However, the rift between the JCP and PLO factions, particularly Fatah, probably played an even greater role in the collapse of the PNF. Fatah was concerned with communist competitors as their strong entrenchment in the OPT could represent the base for an alternative leadership to the PLO. For this reason, many from the Fatah internal conservative current remained wary of the PNF and the JCP role within it, suggesting a withdrawal from the front. Such factors drove Arafat's organisation to make more efforts to assert its predominance over the JCP. Thus, the composition of the National Guidance Committee (NGC), a new coordinating body meant to counter Israel's autonomy plan drafted in the wake of the Camp David accords, reflected Fatah's new take on political activism in the OPT. Though still present, the communists saw their number and influence reduced in the new political body. Moreover, Fatah adopted a new stance on Jordan and decided to open a dialogue with the Hashemite Kingdom. This new relationship reshaped the balance of OPT politics and curtailed the communists' influence. As a measure to oppose the Camp David agreement, the Arab League decided to set up an Arab fund to finance the organisation of Palestinian resistance in the OPT. The Fatah-Jordan rapprochement was fundamental in this framework since the Arab funding was to be managed and channelled to the OPT by a Palestinian-Jordanian Joint Committee. The renewed relations between the PLO Chairman and King Hussein increased their leverage in the OPT political scenario to the detriment of the communists and other nationalist personalities who opposed Jordan's renewed ambition on the West Bank. At the same time this fostered competition between the leftist, nationalist wing of the OPT national movement and those with more conservative positions, notably Fatah, which counted on broader regional support.[15] However, the intensification of the intra-Palestinian political fight, particularly the Fatah-communist rivalry, opened some space for the PFLP. In the context of the

overall game of balances that characterised Palestinian politics, the PFLP tactically allied with the communists in order to balance Fatah's expansion in the OPT.[16]

As the new decade approached, the PFLP, alongside the DFLP and Fatah, started to set up its own branches in the OPT to organise and mobilise the Palestinian population. By 1979 the PFLP had established in the OPT the "Action Front" (*jabhat al-ʿamal*) to which a wide range of trade unions, students, women and professional associations were associated. These PFLP-backed groups had all the word "action" in their name in order to be easily linked to a common affiliation. Fatah and the DFLP followed the same pattern in the build-up of their activities in the OPT founding respectively the "Youth Movement" (*harakat al-shabiba*) and the "Unity Bloc" (*kutlat al-wahda*). In embarking on this enterprise, the PLO factions challenged the primacy of the communists and their "Progressive Bloc" (*al-kutla al-taqaddumiyya*), until then the only political movement engaged in grassroots and labour mobilisation in the OPT. From this point of view, competition for the control of political life seemed to divide the PLO camp and the communists. However, given the fragmentation affecting Palestinian politics, the split between leftists and conservatives that emerged repeatedly within the PLO in the diaspora was reflected also within the OPT. Fatah in particular fostered the feud along this line, especially after the establishment of the Joint-Committee with Jordan. Arafat's faction decided, in accordance with its Jordanian partner, to exploit their control of the Arab finances at the expense of leftist competitors. The funds were then channelled mostly to local leaders whose positions were in line with those of Fatah-Jordan in an effort to "buy" the loyalty of the OPT leadership, especially that of the traditional bourgeois elites.[17] Consequently, the PFLP and other leftist factions focused on mass organisation, a choice that proved to be a remarkable asset at the eruption of the Intifada when the traditional intra-Palestinian balances were initially reshaped.

After 1982 and the destruction of the PLO sanctuary in Lebanon, Palestinian factions bolstered their activities in the OPT. The Palestinian communists, after years of pressure on the Jordan-based Politburo, managed to establish their independent movement and in 1982, they recreated the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) underscoring the rise in prominence of the OPT.[18] Besides this, while the Israeli government outlawed the NGC in 1982, the PFLP for its part started to call for the revival of the PNF. In articulating this political priority for the OPT, the PFLP

highlighted the overall urgency of stopping Israeli plans to establish a collaborating "self-government" in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, by criticising the Palestinian Right for its hesitation concerning a new PNF, the PFLP was indirectly attacking Fatah and Arafat for their contacts with King Hussein and the sudden return of a Jordanian role in the OPT. In the PFLP's view, the Palestinian Right was hesitating on such matters because of its "non-pervasive" and "unstable" presence in the OPT, a weak position that the Right was trying to cover by claiming that a new PNF would threaten the PLO status of sole representative of the Palestinian people.[19]

The mid-1980s were a period of both increasing fragmentation and development for the national movement in the OPT. To a certain extent, the feud of the "inside" mirrored the division of the "outside". As this was the case with the Joint Command and the Democratic Alliance, also in the OPT the Palestinian Left coalesced to counter the Fatah-Jordanian coordination, a trend particularly visible in the context of trade unions, with the General Federation (GFTU) as main battlefield. In 1981, the Workers' Youth Movement (WYM), the Fatah-controlled union, after failing to take over the GFTU from the communists, decided to create a parallel General Federation and a wide range of affiliated unions, often existing only on paper. In doing so, Fatah intended to undermine its leftist rivals by excluding them bureaucratically from the main source of income for the national movement in the OPT, namely the Arab funds administered by the Joint Committee. This, however, pushed the PCP, the DFLP and the PFLP to intensify their grassroots activities thus enabling the Left to expand its base among Palestinian workers and politicising wider segments of the Palestinian society.[20] Signalling the enthusiasm stemming from the successful mobilising effort, PFLP members today still claim that throughout the 1980s, their faction had the strongest presence in the OPT. What is frequently stressed is the contrast between the PFLP's genuine grassroot penetration and Fatah's assertion through financial means.[21] The correspondence between political fragmentation, factionalism and greater popular mobilisation was fully visible in the case of women's associations. Despite the existence of a General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), since the late 1970s or early 1980s the main Palestinian factions created their own women's associations to widen their popular base, as they had done in the context of trade unions. For instance, the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC) was created as the women's association of the Action Front, affiliated to the PFLP.[22] In particular, in the case of

women's mobilisation, the methods and ideological background of each faction changed little. The goal was simply to reach the highest number of women possible.[23]

Besides the role of trade unions and professional associations, the Israeli prisons played a prominent role in the expansion of the national movement in the OPT and the penetration of the Palestinian factions. If the attempt made in 1976 by the Israeli Labour Party to curtail resistance activities through the organisation of municipal elections resulted in the strengthening of the PLO presence in the territories, Likud's "Iron Fist" policy entailing, among other repressive measures, frequent waves of mass imprisonments did not achieve its goals either.[24] While a growing number of activists filled the occupation's jails, prisoners started to organise according to political affiliations. Prisons became a place where an outstanding number of people spent periods in administrative detention, without any charge. During their time behind bars, more experienced militants trained the rest of the inmates in ideology, resistance activities or the main issues concerning the Palestinian national movement and its organisation. In fact, prisons became real political schools and those who spent a considerable term in detention were likely to take part in the resistance network after their liberation and contribute to the politicisation of their families and acquaintances.[25] The prisoners swap between the PF-GC and Israel which occurred in 1985 clearly exemplified this dynamic. After the capture of four Israeli soldiers in Lebanon, the PF-GC negotiated successfully the liberation of approximately 1500 Palestinian militants belonging to all political factions active in the OPT. Those who were liberated on that occasion played a prominent role in the build-up of the resistance infrastructure in the years preceding the Intifada.[26]

The peculiarities of the developing national movement in the OPT lent the PFLP those features that enabled it to play an active role in the Intifada while at the same determining some limits to its action. Political fragmentation and competition for popular support fostered the spread and strengthening of the PLO factions in the OPT. At the same time, the occupation and the absence of direct Arab interferences pulled the PFLP, Fatah and the DFLP closer in terms of long-term goals. These aspects ultimately paved the way to strengthening the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma during the Intifada.

The Emergence of the Islamist Alternative

One of the political prisoners liberated in the 1985 exchange between Israel and the PF-GC was Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, a charismatic leader within the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). He had been arrested in 1984 when the Israeli intelligence services foiled a plan he was coordinating to acquire weapons from the Israeli black market in preparation for the first MB armed operations against the occupier.[27] During the previous decade, Yassin became a key figure in the Islamists' expanding role in Palestinian society. The MB build-up efforts paralleled, although to a more limited extent, the PLO penetration of the OPT and contributed to popular mobilisation, eventually enabling the Islamists to emerge as a prominent force during the Intifada and in the Palestinian political arena more broadly.[28] The gradual rise to prominence of political Islam in Palestine represented a further challenge for the PLO and had a deep impact on the trajectory of the Palestinian Left. Indeed, its rise entailed a double challenge to the PLO's representative status and to the Palestinian Left as radical opposition to Fatah.

MB activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were historically dissociated from active resistance as their goal was "restructuring Palestinian society", morally and culturally. In their view, before organising an effective resistance against Israel, Palestinian society needed to be "re-Islamised". The spread of nationalist and Marxist ideologies represented "corruptive agents" preventing the realisation of an "Islamic state", the utmost solution to the main problems affecting the whole Arab nation.[29] However, their focus on education and cultural activities did not prove effective in attracting wide consensus and consequently, their popularity was very limited at the end of the 1960s. On the one hand, they were rejecting armed struggle when this was propelling the PLO onto the regional and international scene, boosting its bid to represent the Palestinian people. On the other, they entered in a tacit alliance with Jordan which allowed MB activities hoping to thwart the spread of Palestinian nationalism and Marxism, embodied by the PLO. This forged the image of the MB as an elitist force that worked for the status quo at the expense of Palestinian nationalist demands.[30] Their "first public platform", the Islamic Society (*al-jamᶜiyya al-islamiyya*), established in 1967, was meant to address youth needs for an Islamic education through, for instance, the spread of Sayyid Qutb's works on the Qurʾan. Taking advantage of the Israeli policy of "non-interference" in Palestinian cultural and

social life during the first years of the occupation, the MB managed to conduct its activities without significant disruption. Thus, in 1973, the Brotherhood decided to set up a new organisation with a wider scope of activities and geographic outreach. The creation of *al-Mujammaʿ al-Islami* (the Islamic Centre), based in Gaza, enabled the MB to control virtually all the religious institutions and organisations in the OPT, such as the Islamic University in Gaza. This centralising role of *al-Mujammaʿ* emerged even more prominently when the Gaza, West Bank and Jordan branches of the MB merged into one single society in the mid-1970s.[31]

The Islamists gradually gained influence among the population during the second half of the 1970s thanks to the wide range of social services they provided through their clinics, kindergartens, schools and mosques. This started to create some tensions with both the PLO factions and the communists and the foundation of the Islamic University in 1978 became the first ground of an MB confrontation with Fatah. The MB and Arafat's faction started to struggle for the top posts within the newly founded University as both wanted to impose a president from their own ranks. The supporters of the opposing fronts even clashed on the streets of Gaza but as the Islamists were very keen on securing their control on the University, they eventually obtained the post of president for one of their representatives.[32]

At the beginning of the 1980s tensions between the Islamists and the secular camp were on the rise. The most remarkable case was the attack led by several hundreds of MB supporters against the Red Crescent Society in Gaza, in January 1980. The Islamists saw the Red Crescent Society as a Marxist fief and decided to raid it while smashing liquor stores and restaurants serving alcohol on their way towards their target. These episodes are still vivid in the memory of leftist militants from the whole OPT as they demonstrated the Islamists' will to take over control of the national movement by any means, without being concerned about using violence against fellow Palestinians.[33] Resentment towards the Islamists increased after 1982, when the PLO faced an unprecedented crisis in the wake of the expulsion from Lebanon. Emboldened by regional developments, the Islamists thought they could represent an alternative to the failure of the PLO and escalated their attempts to take control of unions and popular associations in the OPT. In the Gaza Strip, they managed to retain a majority in the Engineers Union up to 1987, although they were not

successful in taking over the Arab Medical Society which remained under the control of PLO and communist affiliates. More importantly, through their control of the Islamic University *al-Mujamma'* laid the foundations for broad, youthful popular support in Gaza.[34] Meanwhile, Shaykh Yassin reserved harsh attacks to the PLO, rejecting any cooperation with its factions, and the Israeli authorities turned a blind eye on the Islamists' activities as far as they did not pose a threat to Israel and fostered intra-Palestinian divisions. This contributed to the perception of the Brotherhood and the Islamists as a "reactionary force" prioritising its struggle for power over resistance against the occupation.[35]

However, the MB leadership in the OPT started to endure growing pressure from its base and from a younger generation of cadres because of its abstention from armed struggle. The allegedly successful experiences of "jihad" worldwide, such as Afghanistan's mujahedeen and Lebanon's Hezbollah, seemed to suggest that the same strategy should be adopted to achieve the goals of liberating Palestine and establishing an Islamic State. In this context, in 1979 Fathi al-Shiqaqi, after his expulsion from the MB for open advocacy of armed struggle and his criticism of the Brotherhood's leadership, founded the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (Islamic Jihad).[36] His alliance with some former Fatah members, who were leaning towards Islamist positions and were willing to revive armed struggle in the OPT, allowed the movement to develop an armed branch and set up the first operations against Israeli targets in the West Bank. Therefore, internal and external pressure on the MB was mounting in the early 1980s and this contributed to the decision to embark on the first MB "jihad project". Yassin was at the head of this project as he oversaw fundraising, the acquisition of weapon and arranged military training for selected militants in Jordan. The 1984 MB plan to obtain military material foiled by the Israeli security services and resulting in Yassin's detention was part of this larger project. Despite the failure, the project laid the bases for the future military activity of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), the Palestinian militant organisation established by the MB in the very first days of the Intifada.[37] Hamas emerged as the first organisation, outside the PLO framework, capable of challenging its unique status.

Contrasting Dynamics in the First Intifada: The PFLP Between Opportunity and Marginalisation

The Palestinian population in the OPT was politically mobilised to an unprecedented extent on the eve of the uprising. The frameworks through which this mobilisation occurred were manifold and originated from the long-standing efforts of communist militants, the PLO external push and more recent Islamist activism. The preparation of the grassroots movement was therefore paramount in the incubation period of the revolt.

The ever-increasing harshness of Israeli repressive measures and the steady decline of the economic situation in the OPT provided the material conditions for the explosion of the revolt.[38] The evolution of the political setting in the OPT was the main factor not only behind the long duration of the Intifada, but also represented a development that opened a new phase in Palestinian politics. The PFLP, notwithstanding the serious challenges posed by the post-Beirut phase, managed to develop its presence in the OPT thus securing its place in the national movement at the explosion of the Intifada. It was mainly because of this strengthening process, spanning more than a decade, that the PFLP had the chance to play a significant role once the Intifada began, obtaining a place in the UNLU. Indeed, the people of the OPT, through their upheaval, also gave the PFLP the opportunity to arrest and possibly invert the process of marginalisation which started after 1982, against which all PFLP leadership political manoeuvres had until then failed.

However, the political scenario that the Intifada shaped had a direct impact on long-standing dynamics affecting the PFLP and brought to the fore new sources of tensions. After displaying significant pragmatism during the Intifada first year, the PFLP had to face the re-emergence of the opposition-integration dilemma and its interconnections with the new tensions. Policy fluctuations thus reappeared, undermining the PFLP's ability to take advantage of the positive developments stemming from the uprising.

The PFLP's Pragmatism During the First "Triumphant" Year of the Intifada

During its first year, the widespread popular uprising in the OPT saw an ascending trajectory in terms of growing popular participation and objectives achieved. As the Intifada took the leading position in PLO priorities,

the PFLP displayed a remarkable pragmatism in adapting its line and narrative to the goals articulated by the movement in the OPT. The PFLP developed its position in the intra-Palestinian debate on the means to support the Intifada and its scope, displaying its connection with the grassroots movement in Palestine. Thus, the PFLP's proactive conduct during the first year of the Intifada contrasted with its eventual inability to capitalise on such positive aspects.

Despite the role played in the OPT by the PLO-affiliated organisations and institutions, the eruption of such a massive uprising and its quick spread across the territories caught the Palestinian factions by surprise.[39] Certainly, the leadership of the PFLP, like the other PLO organisations, did not expect a major outbreak. Indeed, in the weeks preceding the 9 December road accident that sparked the start of the Intifada, the PFLP's attention and political priorities did not differ from those spelled during the 18th PNC. The PFLP was very concerned by regional developments, in particular the Arab summit held in Amman that decreed the freedom of every state to re-establish its relations with "Camp David Egypt".[40] On the very eve of the Intifada, the PFLP still resorted to its traditional trope on armed struggle and on the needed "development of the confrontation and the preparation to bear the burden of the long-term battle".[41]

However, as it became clear that the uprising was not a simple outburst and as it started to develop its main features, the PFLP demonstrated the ability to adapt its discourse to the new circumstances, outlining some key points of its approach towards the Intifada at quite an early stage. The PFLP grasped the importance of what was happening and it did not hesitate to define the Intifada as a "qualitative landmark" (*mahatta naw'iyya*).[42] This definition became recurrent in the PFLP's discourse and was employed to refer to the new kind of popular mobilisation that emerged with the Intifada, a mobilisation where the regular, popular dimension of the protests, with the establishment of Popular Committees to coordinate action, took the place of the elite armed operations that dominated PFLP and PLO strategy so far. Strictly related to this is the early emergence of the call for "mass civil disobedience" as the main way to challenge the occupation and establish an alternative polity in the OPT.[43] This slogan originated directly from the internal leadership in the OPT and proved the PFLP's awareness concerning the new means of struggle. Moreover, the PFLP's insistence on civil disobedience throughout the uprising also marked a difference with Fatah's desire to exploit the Intifada in order to reach a political arrangement.

A communique released in the second week of the Intifada concerning the organisation's stance vis-à-vis the international community also signalled the adaptation of the PFLP to the new scenario. In the communique, the PFLP called for international intervention in the OPT, demanding that the United Nations (UN) dispatch observers in order to document Israel's violation of "UN resolutions and laws and all the international charters related to human rights".[44] The invocation of international law, especially in terms of UN resolutions, was an innovative aspect in PFLP policy as Habash's organisation had criticised vehemently throughout its history the position expressed by the UN General Assembly and the Security Council, usually rejecting their provisions. The PFLP's change appeared as an initial adaptation to the priorities set by the Intifada from the start, namely the end of the occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the OPT.[45] The leadership of the uprising articulated these goals through the distribution of leaflets which eventually became the fundamental organising tools of the Intifada. More significantly, the Intifada succeeded in attracting global attention and in particular that of the UN Security Council which issued three resolutions in less than a month condemning Israel's violations, such as the deportation of Palestinian civilians.[46] Consequently, the PFLP adjusted its positions and discourse to proceed along the lines of the new phase and possibly take advantage of them.[47]

The whole Palestinian national movement was entering a new phase of animated internal debate aimed at filling the new political spaces. The wider range of action was a result of the successful escalation of the Intifada, its inclusion of growing sectors of OPT society, the re-centring of Palestinian political balance and the impact the uprising was having at the regional and international levels.[48] The new priorities represented also a common ground for the main PLO factions that shared the most urgent concerns, at least initially. All the four factions represented in the UNLU aimed at the continuous escalation of the uprising, the reaffirmation of PLO authority in the OPT, the establishment of an institutional framework alternative to the occupier's and the diplomatic efforts needed on the international level to advance the demands voiced by the Intifada. In this context of renewed cohesiveness, the PFLP strongly defended the political and operational link between the PLO and the UNLU along with the other factions. Replying to claims coming particularly from Israeli and US officials that the Intifada was a "spontaneous" phenomenon unrelated to PLO action, the PFLP stressed that the prominent PLO role was

evident in the work of the Popular Committees and in the "subsequent waves" of protests throughout the OPT towns and villages.[49] Afterwards, the appearance of regular references to the PLO in leaflets issued by the UNLU settled definitively the dispute over PLO involvement in the leadership of the uprising. An additional contribution to PLO unity was the absence of smaller groups within the OPT. This excluded them from the decision-making process and deprived the Arab regimes, especially Syria, of an important tool to interfere in Palestinian affairs, thus fostering cohesion among the bigger groups.[50] At the same time, Fatah, the DFLP, the PCP and the PFLP all had to reposition themselves within the political scene that the Intifada was shaping. This acquired more importance because the uprising was reshuffling the power balance among these forces, limiting Fatah supremacy, particularly in relation to the PFLP.[51]

Therefore, the PFLP articulated its positions, intervening constantly in the debate and sometimes signalling a sharp contrast with other factions or local actors operating in the OPT. One of the main issues animating the Palestinian internal debate was related to the timing, modes and scope of the PLO political initiative to settle the conflict, or in other words, how did the PLO should act in order to "capitalise" on the Intifada.[52] For its part, the PFLP had already gradually accepted the idea of an international peace conference in the years preceding the Intifada. After December 1987 however, the UNLU stated clearly among its goals the achievement of a settlement through the international peace conference.[53] This became a systematic demand for the PFLP and in its positioning within the debate, it did not adopt a hard-line position. The PFLP stated several times throughout 1988 that both the landmark results scored by the uprising and the international détente allowed by the USSR-US rapprochement on a number of issues were paving the way towards the settlement of the conflict with Israel.[54] From this position, the PFLP condemned the "nihilist current" within the national movement, mainly composed of pro-Syrian elements with little if any presence in the OPT, who did not acknowledge the positive developments that the Intifada made possible.[55] At the same time, the PFLP did not share the aims of those who "wanted to rush into negotiations", even direct talks with Israel, in order to "catch the fruits" of the Intifada momentum. Notwithstanding the achievements of the Intifada, the power balance, especially at the global level, was still in favour of Israel and its American patron, so the uprising needed to be further escalated and reach the stage of a comprehensive national civil disobedience.[56]

The PFLP was thus against "gratuitous concessions" like the readiness to recognise Israel and start bilateral talks displayed by a wide range of "personalities" from Hanna Siniora, editor of the Jerusalem-based *al-Fajr* newspaper and the Gazan lawyer Fayez Abu Rahma, to former *al-Hadaf* editor and PFLP member Bassam Abu Sharif.[57] Indeed, the PFLP reserved its strongest criticism for those intellectuals and personalities who acquired increasing relevance as unofficial spokespersons for the Palestinians, especially when an intermediate between the United States or even Israel and the PLO was needed. Despite their PLO connection, the most prominent among them, such as Siniora or Birzeit University Professor Sari Nusseibeh, were directly dependent on Arafat's guidance, thus the UNLU and the rest of the PLO external leadership had little influence on their initiatives.[58] From this stemmed the PFLP's scepticism towards these personalities who in Abu Ali Mustafa's words were "more inclined towards American solutions".[59] Habash himself warned the "personalities" when the possibility of a meeting with US Secretary of State Shultz emerged, stressing that such a step would be considered as an "act of treason by the Palestinians".[60] In this new dynamic in which independent figures emerged within the Intifada political landscape, the PFLP favoured contacts with the representatives of the OPT grassroots leadership such as Bassam al-Shak'a, the elected Nablus Mayor deposed by the Israeli occupation administration, or the Gaza Red Crescent President Haydar Abd al-Shafi. These persons had long been at the forefront of the national movement in the OPT and, unlike Nusseibeh or Siniora, enjoyed wide popular support. Therefore, the PFLP often invoked their opinions to show the alignment of the internal leadership of the uprising with its own line, especially concerning potential political initiatives.[61]

The dynamism of the political situation throughout the first year of the Intifada, and the PFLP's response to it, was also evident in the debate around new possible institutional frameworks to support the uprising diplomatically and strengthen the PLO presence in the OPT. Initially, the idea of forming a Palestinian government in exile was put on the table.[62] The PFLP did not oppose in principle such a measure but thought that charging the PLO with an additional, burdensome task was pointless. The PLO had to strengthen existing institutions, like the Popular Committees on the ground, and continue to gain international support to raise its status and reach an equal representation vis-à-vis Israel.[63] However, the PFLP made a reverse when a major development occurred in summer 1988, showing again a certain readiness to adapt to a fluid political scenario. In

August, King Hussein of Jordan announced his decision to severe definitively the Kingdom's ties with the West Bank. In doing so, he dissolved the Jordanian parliament that included representatives from the OPT, cut all administrative links and cancelled a 1.3 billion dollars development programme. Hussein declared that this step came as a response to the wishes of Arab and PLO representatives who believed that the national Palestinian struggle and identity would be enhanced Jordan's relinquishment of its links with the West Bank.[64] While considering such a development as a direct result of the Intifada, the PFLP showed all its historical distrust towards the Jordanian regime. According to the PFLP, King Hussein's step aimed at putting pressure on the PLO. Habash clarified in a public letter that Hussein's goal was to create obstacles to the PLO by producing an institutional vacuum. His intention was to "blackmail" the Palestinian national movement and demonstrate its inability to manage such a critical situation.

The PLO thus had to accept the challenge and fill the gap, reconsidering the idea of a government in exile as well.[65] As the Jordanian move sparked an intense debate within the PLO, the idea of declaring the establishment of an independent Palestinian State in the OPT started to gain popularity. Indeed, the PLO factions begun discussing this potential step and after a round of consultations reached a first consensus, agreeing to issue a Declaration of Independence and draft an Independence Charter during an extraordinary session of the PNC to be held from 10 to 15 November 1988. The PFLP clearly welcomed the decision but pointed out that it should only serve the final goals of the Intifada and sustain its escalation. This caveat was addressed to "some Palestinian circles" who saw in the Declaration a way to overcome the PLO programme and respond to international pressures that urged the recognition of Israel as a base for negotiations.[66] Nevertheless, when the text of the Declaration of Independence was published, followed by the 19th PNC Political Statement, it became clear that the PFLP had accepted some unprecedented compromises. For instance, the Declaration referred to the 1947 UN Partition plan to legitimise the future Palestinian State, implicitly recognising Israel's right to exist, and rejected the use of violence to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. By the same token, the Political Statement explicitly accepted UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 as a base for negotiations and completely omitted any reference to the Palestinian National Charter, preserving no role for armed struggle.[67] Although the PFLP refused to adopt the PNC Political Statement because of its

recognition of the UN resolutions, it nonetheless voted in favour of the Declaration of Independence signalling its attachment to PLO unity and its conformity to the priorities set by the Intifada, namely the establishment of a Palestinian State through peace negotiations. Indeed, in explaining the PFLP's position, Habash invoked the will of the Intifada to justify both the de facto acceptance of a two-state solution and the controversial stand concerning armed struggle. The Secretary-General affirmed that the PFLP wanted to preserve the "popular nature (*tabiʿa jamahiriyya*)" of the Intifada, or in other words favoured non-violent means of struggle that had successfully included all sectors of the Palestinian population in the OPT.[68] The shift made by the PFLP was also evident in its arguments against UN resolutions 242 and 338. While reaffirming the long-standing flaws of resolutions that dealt with the Palestinian question as one of refugees, the PFLP nonetheless stressed particularly its opposition to the timing of this acceptance. The PFLP believed that Israel still had the balance of power in its favour, but apparently was not a priori against the concept of "land for peace" upheld in these resolutions, marking the prioritisation of the diplomatic initiative, a position that the pre-Intifada PFLP always refused to adopt.[69]

Throughout the first hectic year of the Intifada the PFLP proved to be responsive to the priorities that the uprising itself articulated. From this stemmed its new rhetoric and positions concerning the end of the occupation and the political initiative to settle the conflict. However, the PLO leadership's attempts to reap the benefits of the Intifada diplomatically contributed to the re-emergence of problematic aspects affecting the PFLP's agency, first and foremost policy fluctuation. As such an initiative sparked contrasting reactions in the OPT, the PFLP was confronted with growing popular opposition to the PLO leadership which emphasised its opposition-integration dilemma.

Losing the Intifada Momentum

The end of 1988 had seen the Palestinians and the PLO make a Declaration of Independence and, most importantly, an unprecedented PLO push for a negotiated solution of the conflict with Israel. The political document ensuing from the 19th PNC represented what was until then the clearest expression of the PLO leadership's will to pursue the path of the peace process. Consequently, expectations were high among the supporters of Arafat's line. In the view of many top cadres, the Intifada seemed to have

opened up all possibilities. In this context of optimism within the "moderates" ranks, Arafat launched his "peace offensive". In fact, the PLO Chairman had already started touring various countries to gain recognition for the newly declared Palestinian State. These recognitions were meant to raise PLO status worldwide and gain support for the organisation of an international peace conference. However, Arafat's main goal was opening a dialogue with the United States.[70] The PLO Chairman managed to start contacts with the Bush administration as well as indirect talks with Israeli officials through Palestinian personalities. Indeed, such PLO-US-Israel dialogue occurred through several rounds and, despite the PLO's declared demand for an international conference, it was mainly based on two Israeli and American conceived plans. First the Shamir plan, drafted by Israel's Likud prime minister, which called for elections in the OPT to identify a Palestinian delegation team.[71] Secondly, the Baker plan, a revised, more complicated version of the previous initiative, which envisaged a series of indirect PLO-Israel consultations through US and Egyptian mediation, with the practical goal of keeping the PLO at the negotiating table without forcing Israel to make "excessive" concessions.[72]

However, at the same time, the uprising in the OPT was reaching a critical point. At the beginning of 1989 the Israeli government ordered a massive repression campaign in an attempt to quell the Intifada. The freer hand given to the army resulted in increasing fatalities and injuries as well as detentions among the Palestinian civilian population. Israel's goal was not only to raise the human costs of the protests, but also to reassert its military and administrative control over the OPT which the Intifada strived to challenge since its inception.[73] This in turn led to a radicalisation of the protest. Besides the usual marches, strikes and stone-throwing, more violent attacks started to occur such as handgun shootings and an increased use of Molotov cocktails.[74] The PLO leadership therefore was facing two sources of pressure. On the one hand, the Bush administration was trying to convince Arafat to accept the Baker plan.[75] On the other, both the terms of negotiations drafted in the American-sponsored peace plan and Israeli repressive measures sparked disillusion among Palestinian grassroots militants over the chances of a political settlement in the near future. The most radical among them, such as local PFLP and Hamas cadres, went so far as to accuse the external PLO leadership and Intifada leaders of being willing to sacrifice the original revolutionary demands of the Intifada in order to reach a settlement with the enemy.[76] As Palestinian-US consultations proceeded hesitantly, no breakthrough was

in sight. The PLO leadership was facing the serious dilemma of preserving the pace of a radicalising popular mobilisation without renouncing dialogue with the United States, which Arafat, in particular, had sought throughout the mid-1980s.

At first analysis, the stalemate of negotiations and the margins for a possible radicalisation might be interpreted as two positive developments for the PFLP. The difficulties that Arafat faced in pursuing his line appeared to confirm the PFLP's scepticism over the United States' real intentions. Besides, the escalating trend of the uprising apparently demonstrated the ability of the PFLP to express the sentiments of the masses. A failing negotiating line and a radicalised uprising might have lent the PFLP's positions more weight within the PLO. Nevertheless, the situation was more complex than this. The PFLP had to cope with a series of contrasting factors and concerns to which the organisation responded ambiguously. The preservation of PLO unity, as well as that of the PFLP itself, were as much a concern as the attempt to regain ground within the internal Palestinian political competition. Moreover, as the world and PLO attention focused on the issue of negotiations, the dynamic of confrontation between "external" and "internal" leaderships, both on the national and factional levels, developed in a divide that risked alienating the popular base from the leaders in exile. These clashing dynamics ended up fostering policy fluctuation which, as observed during the previous phase, undermined the PFLP's action within the uprising.

Furthermore, any leftist challenge to Fatah appeared even more unlikely due to the divergences separating the PFLP from the DFLP and the communists. The legacy of failed coalitions in the previous years certainly still loomed on the idea of renewed leftist coordination. However, the debate on political initiatives in support of the Intifada revealed wider fault lines within the leftist camp. The PCP maintained the boldest position on negotiations with Israel, going so far as to support mutual recognition as a precondition to start the talks. The communists also accepted the Israeli-backed proposal for elections aimed at selecting a Palestinian delegation team. Predictably, the PFLP did not spare criticism to the PCP and its Secretary-General Bashir Barghouti, condemning the communists for violating Palestinian consensus as formulated during the 18th PNC. As Abu Ali Mustafa affirmed, the PCP was rushing into negotiations by making "gratuitous concession" to Israel and the United States.[77] During the debate on the formation of a government in exile, the PFLP directed its criticisms at the DFLP too. The DFLP's quick support to the idea was

seen as an opportunistic move to gain more influence within Palestinian institutions.[78] The PFLP's decision to avoid signing the 19th PNC political statement reflected the division with the rest of the Left which subscribed the document. In light of its support to the Declaration of Independence, the PFLP's position was mainly a symbolic statement of its oppositional role within the PLO. The PFLP, unlike other leftist factions, would not give Fatah an automatic approval to its agenda, underscoring the importance, at least rhetorical, of marking a difference.

The continuation of the Intifada also brought to the fore the growing problems of cadre bureaucratisation and corruption, both side effects of the PLO effort to bypass the administrative framework of the occupation and long-standing trends within the PLO.[79] The PFLP faced the dilemma of being the faction traditionally representing revolutionary commitment and honesty and at the same time being affected by these problems as well. A problem of credibility started to emerge as the PFLP resumed its calls for PLO democratic reform, as it used to do in the mid-1980s during the PLO formal split. The PFLP's inability to stand up to these challenges contributed to transforming the Intifada from a "revolutionary" moment to revive its action into a lost opportunity.

Avoiding the Split: The PFLP's Choice of Integration

Arafat's implementation of his agenda to capitalise on the Intifada saw the re-emergence of the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma. The PFLP's unclear positioning over the PLO Chairman's diplomatic strategy was now more evident than in the past, as its participation in the PNC gave formal approval to Arafat's line. Fluctuations in its line resurfaced as a natural development of this ambiguous positioning; these were further emphasised by the opposition that the PLO leadership's agenda met from grassroots movement in the OPT.

While the Intifada entered its second year, the PFLP still identified achieving comprehensive civil disobedience as the strategic goal of the uprising. In his speech to mark the twenty-first anniversary of the PFLP's establishment, George Habash openly called for the "radicalisation of the Intifada".[80] At the same time, the PFLP stated clearly its position within the internal Palestinian debate over PLO political strategy as it declared its determination to "hold the concessions in check".[81] In a scheme

reminiscent of what happened in 1984–85 when Arafat convened the PNC in Amman and signed the coordination agreement with King Hussein, the PFLP condemned the PLO Chairman's declarations made at the UN General Assembly in Geneva in which he recognised Israel's right to exist and formulated the PLO's renunciation of "terrorism". For the PFLP this "lack of commitment" to the national line represented a "return to individualist policies" and posed a serious threat to national unity, putting national achievements at risk just to meet American requirements.[82] In a display of self-confidence, Habash affirmed in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir* that the PFLP "would have seen the failure of Arafat's line towards the US in due course".[83] However, the PFLP leadership did not maintain such a defiant position and it did not appear prone to confront Fatah as it had done in the mid-1980s. Since the first steps of US-Palestinian dialogue, the official PFLP line alternated between criticism and some positive evaluations. For instance, the United States' acceptance of talks with Palestinian representatives could be seen as a successful result of the Intifada. After two years, the Intifada had reaffirmed strongly the PLO role as legitimate Palestinian representative, signalling this status to the international community and especially to the United States. The PFLP deemed such recognition coming from the United States as a "historical step back" from its unwillingness to acknowledge the role of the PLO and to negotiate with a Palestinian interlocutor about a political settlement of the conflict.[84]

The alternation of criticism and praise followed the evolution of Arafat's diplomatic strategy and reflected internal opposite thrusts pushing at different times for a confrontational or a reconciliatory approach. As indirect PLO-US talks continued on a regular basis, the PFLP started to attack the core of such negotiations, namely American support for the Shamir plan and its central idea of elections in the OPT. Besides breaking with the line sanctioned during the 19th PNC, the project of elections embodied yet another attempt by the Israeli authorities to form an alternative Palestinian leadership and stop the escalation of the Intifada. To demonstrate its alignment with the masses in the OPT, the PFLP reported the critical voices of many "nationalist" personalities opposing the Shamir Plan and underlined its proximity with the UNLU that stated in its 34th leaflet its rejection of the plan and its opposition to any form of self-government under occupation.[85]

The PLO Chairman and his Deputy Salah Khalaf continued to encourage indirect dialogue with the Bush administration with some bold

declarations, provoking wide discontent among the ranks of the PLO opposition, notably the PFLP. Both declared their support and hope for future direct, bilateral negotiations with Israel as well as their agreement on the idea of forming a common market including Jordan, Israel and the future Palestinian State.[86] In a press statement, the PFLP declared its resolve to face such "rightist violations" with firmness and renewed its commitment to the uprising in order to make it reach a "higher point".[87] This time the PFLP seemed initially determined to make action follow its bid for the escalation of the Intifada, by resuming cross-border attacks. In February, a PFLP commando carried out a joint operation with the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) in Hasbaya, a Lebanese town bordering the Israeli occupied buffer zone. This operation came along with attacks executed by other opposition factions like the PF-GC. Although Abu Ahmad Fouad, the PFLP's head of military affairs, denied that such an operation was meant to hinder the talks with the United States, it is difficult not to see it as a way to pressure the PLO leadership vis-à-vis its American counterpart, after Arafat's renouncement of "terrorism".[88] Notwithstanding these skirmishes, the PFLP did not intend to provoke a major break within the PLO and sought an entente with Fatah as soon as the occasion arose. This attitude had already emerged in the pre-Intifada phase but was accentuated during the uprising and probably because of it. By the same token, Fatah too looked for an understanding with the opposition during meetings within PLO internal fora, or, in other words, tried to co-opt it. In accordance with this pattern, during a first halt of US-Palestinian dialogue, the PLO held a Central Council meeting. After publication of the resulting political statement, Abu Ali Mustafa, the top PFLP member taking part, expressed satisfaction with the "overall positive results". The reaffirmation of the 19th PNC calls to support the escalation of the Intifada, even by means of armed struggle, and for an international peace conference were sufficient to reinforce PLO unity, notwithstanding internal disputes.[89] The PFLP leadership, beyond its rhetoric over political protection of the Intifada and action to prolong it, had by then chosen to prioritise cohesion of the PLO, notwithstanding Arafat's concessions and lack of respect towards the official line decreed by the last PNC session. The exiled leaders of the PFLP had probably come to believe, at least partially, in the possibility of transforming the PLO into a state thanks to the victories achieved by the uprising.[90]

A further demonstration of the PFLP's unwillingness to alienate the PLO leadership came when the internal dispute over the peace process was

apparently reignited. While in spring 1989 the US Secretary of State James Baker tried to revive indirect dialogue with the PLO with his policies of mediations and "tailor-made" talks on each issue,[91] the PLO Chairman made another resounding gesture to signal his seriousness about negotiating with Israel. During a visit to Paris, he declared to French State Television that the Palestinian National Charter, the PLO founding document, was "obsolete" (*c'est caduc*, in French). Arafat made this comment after being asked about one of the Charter clauses calling for the destruction of Israel. Moreover, he also did not rule out completely the idea of elections in the OPT, hinting at a possible consideration of the Shamir-Baker plan.[92] Such a declaration would have provoked an earthquake in the ranks of the opposition just three years earlier. The PFLP obviously did not share Arafat's belief over the National Charter and Habash declared that the PLO Chairman did not speak in the name of the Palestinian people.[93] However, the tone of the criticisms, even in the PFLP Politburo's statements, was kept low-key. Arafat was not directly attacked, the Politburo simply warned those Palestinian voices speaking in favour of Baker's "tailor-made" negotiations.[94] For his part, Habash stated that he did not agree on defining Arafat a traitor, as other opposition factions were suggesting. He estimated that since Shamir still refused to meet him, this was proof that he was not betraying the national cause. The PFLP Secretary-General affirmed that his faction would "struggle within national institutions to impose the correct line" and that the PFLP even accepted the idea of a referendum to decide whether the National Charter could be amended or not.[95] Keeping divisions within the boundaries of ordinary PLO debate was evidently a priority for the PFLP leadership.

In accordance with this principle, the PFLP was interested in fostering the perception that the main Palestinian factions shared common intents, despite US-Palestinian dialogue having stirred much debate within the Palestinian national movement. Therefore, the PFLP welcomed the results of Fatah's Fifth National Conference during which the movement formally rejected the Shamir plan, reaffirming its commitment to the political and diplomatic line ensued from the 19th PNC, after no possibility for official recognition of the PLO as a negotiating partner by both the United States and Israel emerged during the indirect talks.[96] The concern for unity was so strong that the PFLP recognised, in a joint statement with Fatah in May 1990, the concept of "tactical flexibility" alongside the right of return, self-determination and the establishment of the independent state as the "base for the Palestinian peace project".[97] Given Arafat's

precedents in terms of "individualist" policies, the PFLP's position corresponded almost to a full alignment to whatever measure the chairman might take to pursue the goal of a political settlement.

The PFLP leadership, after having perceived the possibility of reshaping the balance of the Palestinian political scenario at the beginning of the Intifada, eventually acknowledged its inability to exert effective influence on the "orientations of the PLO executive leadership".[98] As the Islamist camp, with Hamas at its head, continued to challenge the status of the PLO within Palestinian politics, refusing all invitations to enter the UNLU, the PFLP decided to cling to its role of loyal opposition to Fatah.[99] This orientation reflected the PFLP's prioritisation of integration within the PLO framework over estrangement due to disputes over the line pursued. The legacy of the split in the 1980s, the actual development, albeit hesitant, of PLO-US dialogue and the Islamists' rise to prominence, strengthened the PFLP's adherence to institutional integration. Nonetheless, such a preference came with policy fluctuation as oppositional priorities still preserved their influence on the PFLP's agency.

The PFLP's Inside-Outside Divide

The PFLP's success in building an extensive, grassroots presence in the OPT not only ensured its participation in the UNLU after the outbreak of the Intifada, but also influenced the internal organisational balance. The relationship between the "inside" network and the "outside" leadership did not correspond to the one between the latter and any of the PFLP's branches in the diaspora. Given the peculiar situation of the OPT, contacts were less straightforward and the PFLP movement in the territories (PFLP-OPT) enjoyed a qualitatively different status that fitted into the same pattern of relations existing between the UNLU and the PLO.[100] Clearly, the political status of the PFLP-OPT was also raised due to the direct engagement into the uprising effort. Hence, a tension between the old guard in exile and cadres in the inside emerged, especially as the two groups started to diverge on political lines. This inside-outside dynamic represented a further source of pressure on the PFLP with clear repercussions on its agency.

During the first months of the uprising coordination between the PFLP-OPT and the exiled leadership worked smoothly. Similarly to other factions, the PFLP was interested in empowering its structure in the OPT, widening the dimensions and scope of the Popular Committees. The

PFLP also needed to demonstrate tight bonds between the inside and outside in order to respond to the hostile propaganda that was trying to discredit the PLO by denying its involvement in the Intifada. To disavow such claims, the PFLP stressed the liaising role played by the Popular Committees as well as emphasising that the inside leadership acknowledged the legitimacy of the PLO.[101] The relatively quick changes in the PFLP's position towards the issue of political settlement, the idea of an international conference and full acceptance of the two-state solution showed responsiveness to the priorities dictated by the "masses" in the OPT. As the PFLP-OPT was mainly an underground organisation it badly needed to find a political echo in the external leadership. The latter, for its part, aimed at transforming the PFLP-OPT into its main branch after the decades of prominence enjoyed by the Jordanian and Lebanese diasporas.[102] The outside and inside were equally determined to reach the overall goal of empowering Palestinian institutions to challenge the infrastructure of the occupation.

However, the old guard in exile did not view with full favour the potential emergence of a new generation of cadres and leaders and wanted to maintain its control over the reins of the organisation. This dynamic was ongoing in all the main PLO factions and the PFLP was no exception.[103] The main division between the PFLP-OPT and the outside leadership emerged over the PFLP's line towards Fatah's leading role in shaping Palestinian political initiative and the measures Arafat was taking to pursue his diplomatic agenda. As long as the PFLP kept denouncing the Palestinian Right's attempts to capitalise too early on the Intifada, the grassroots movement was satisfied with its leadership voicing a hard-line position in the OPT and prioritising the "revolutionary" effort. However, the PFLP's official line started to appear more ambiguous after the beginning of US-PLO indirect dialogue and this fostered discontent among the rank and file. The PFLP-OPT saw Arafat as committed to pursuing his personal agenda, "diverting" the Intifada to achieve his goal. In the light of this, the grassroots movement did not understand why, despite denouncing the PLO Chairman's violations, the external leadership was reluctant to adopt a more intransigent line and, if needed, to challenge more seriously Arafat's leading position. As the external leadership continued to hold an ambiguous position towards Fatah's policies, and its flirtations with US negotiation plans, dissatisfaction grew within the PFLP-OPT and the overall popularity of the faction started to shrink.[104]

Besides such ambiguity, phenomena of bureaucratisation, corruption and rent-seeking among the PFLP's higher cadres contributed to foster the divide. These problems emerged more seriously when, between 1989 and 1990, the institutional framework of the PLO in the OPT formed by the Popular Committees, the trade unions and the associations had expanded significantly. As several local leaders were associated with episodes of corruption, the distance between the popular base and the leadership widened.[105] In the light of these phenomena, while the PFLP started to call for "democratic reforms" in the PLO and for the creation of a control system to eradicate corruption and rent-seeking, it did not enjoy popular credibility. The PFLP's external leadership was denouncing a major issue threatening the status of the whole PLO while pretending that this did not affect the organisation itself.[106] The credibility of the outside leadership's calls for reform was even lower in the eyes of its base, as it started to demand a reformulation of the factions' quota during the future session of the PNC. While the PFLP called for PLO reform, invoking the need for representation of the Intifada demands, such calls did not envisage wider recognition for representatives of the national movement in the OPT. Ultimately in another example of policy fluctuation, on the one hand the PFLP leadership demanded in official documents and declarations a more equal position vis-à-vis Arafat, while on the other, it justified moderation towards the "Right's violations", appealing to its concern for unity.[107]

Moreover, to a certain extent the external leadership appeared distanced from the PFLP-OPT and the situation on the ground. For instance, little notice was given to the voice of the PFLP-OPT in *Al-Hadaf*. While Politburo statements, declarations and interviews released by top leaders in exile appeared frequently in the official mouthpiece, the political documents issued by the internal movement were published very rarely. Throughout 1989 and 1990 only two communiques by the PFLP-OPT found their way in the PFLP official press. The insistence of these published communiques on the recognition of the link between the UNLU and the PLO, as well as the stress on the prominence of national institutions, reflected the outside leadership's need to demonstrate its control over the inside. In addition, the criticisms that these documents addressed to Arafat's strategy and his interest in the Shamir plan responded to the logics of the PFLP's institutional opposition rather than outlining the PFLP-OPT's own oppositional agenda.[108]

The main effect of the inside-outside divide within the PFLP was to strengthen the external leadership's push towards integration. Adherence to the leverage stemming from the PLO institutional integration went along with continued control within the PFLP. The PFLP-OPT drew its political legitimacy from its popular entrenchment and was less dependent, unlike the diaspora leadership, on the PLO institutional framework as it took shape outside the OPT. Therefore, local cadres were more likely to head for a harsher confrontation with Fatah, if not to disengage from the PLO decision-making process. Thus, for the PFLP leadership, validating the line upheld by the PFLP-OPT entailed questioning its own role within the PLO institutions.[109] The divide between the outside leadership and the PFLP-OPT widened in the following years, especially after the advent of the Oslo era and despite the relocation of the PFLP's exiled leadership in the OPT. Similarly, there was a continuing problem of lack of clarity in the PFLP line towards the peace process, and in the meaning of the PFLP's opposition to Fatah, notably in the light of Hamas' ascendance as Arafat faction's main competitor.[110]

The Problematic Encounter with Political Islam

The dynamics leading to the spread of the Islamist factions' popularity in the OPT provided the basis for competition with the PLO within the national movement. The Intifada, since its very beginning, saw the Islamist camp, and particularly Hamas, launching the first serious challenge to the dominant secular nationalist factions for predominance in the Palestinian political arena. As a proof of this, Hamas, as well as Islamic Jihad, never fully coordinated with the PLO factions in the organisation and support of the uprising. Although the Islamists did respect the UNLU instructions and schedule on strikes, boycotts and marches, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad published their own leaflets and set their own resistance activities. In Hamas' case, the leadership aimed at weighing up the strength of the movement and demonstrate an equal, if not superior, capability to mobilise the Palestinian masses when compared to the PLO.[111]

As for the PFLP, the challenge was twofold since the Islamists were not only ideologically at odds with the PFLP but were also rising as a new radical actor in opposition to the PLO leadership. Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad were deeply involved in fields where the Left had always been very present, ranging from social services or trade unions to underground guerrilla operations. Despite the direct threat that the Islamists

represented to its popular base, the PFLP did not organise a consistent response. This was due initially to an underestimation of the Islamists' entrenchment among the population of the OPT that many PLO activists and leaders displayed.[112] The PFLP, at least during the first years of the Intifada, also underestimated the Islamists' challenge, particularly in Hamas' case. Therefore, the PFLP's attitude towards the Islamic Resistance Movement appeared rather unclear, paralleling the inconsistencies displayed towards other political challenges that emerged during the Intifada. More precisely, Hamas and Islamic Jihad's emergence accentuated the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma. The Islamists' growing relevance was a materialisation of an effective alternative to the PFLP's own opposition to the PLO leadership. As a result, especially in the wake of the First Intifada, this development emphasised the PFLP's fluctuation between adherence to the Fatah-led PLO and Hamas' opposition policies.

The PFLP and its official press did not pay much attention to Hamas until late 1988, when competition within the Palestinian camp started to be more evident in light of the PLO's "peace offensive". At this stage the PFLP was very critical towards Hamas because of its decision to act outside the framework of the UNLU. As Deputy Secretary-General Abu Ali Mustafa affirmed, "Hamas' refusal to join the national institutions was causing its retreat from the Intifada because popular consensus stood with the slogans and priorities set by the PLO-affiliated organisations".[113] Despite such claims, Hamas' agenda continued to concern the PFLP as demonstrated by its attempt to discredit the policies of the Islamic Resistance Movement. In the context of intense debate about the Shamir plan, the PFLP blamed Hamas for its readiness to maintain contacts with the Israeli authorities, affirming that some Hamas representatives had met with Defence Minister Rabin. In addition, the PFLP denounced Shaikh Yassin's support for the idea of elections in the OPT under international supervision, aimed at selecting Palestinian representatives who would start talks with Israel and its international partners. As this project served Israel's goal to undermine PLO authority, Hamas' position was seen as an attempt to benefit from a possible weakening of the PLO.[114]

Notwithstanding the conflicting positions, the PFLP started to change its attitude towards the Islamists due to both their growing popularity and divergences with the PLO leadership concerning the line to support the Intifada diplomatically. The PFLP shared Fatah's goal of containing Hamas' growth as the new radical actor.[115] However, the PFLP saw in the Islamists a potential ally in its effort to counterbalance the PLO

leadership. From this stemmed the PFLP's repeated calls for Hamas to join "national institutions", the UNLU first of all.[116] The new approach demonstrated that the PFLP understood its relations with Hamas through the traditional pattern of intra-Palestinian relations. As it had been the case with Fatah on several occasions, political and ideological differences could be downplayed in light of the common nationalist struggle with Israel that represented the ultimate "common denominator". Nevertheless, if the PLO itself had already dropped the principle of "consensus politics", as the results of the 19th PNC showed,[117] it was very unlikely that Hamas would embrace it, especially because of its bid for predominance within Palestinian politics. During the first and most serious attempt to include Hamas in the PLO in spring 1990, the Islamist movement compromised all chances to join upcoming PNC sessions by demanding a share of 40 to 50 seats in the Council. Such a request showed Hamas' resolve to equal Fatah and its rejection of the traditional patterns of PLO politics.[118]

The PFLP's attempts to nurture more positive contacts with the Islamist camp combined with a certain adoption of Islamist rhetoric. The PFLP's leaders started to quote figures like Omar ibn al-Khattab and Shaikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam alongside the usual personae of Marxist heritage and Islamic feasts were included in the PFLP's political calendar. These steps aimed at showing that the PFLP legitimised the emerging Islamist movement as a historical part of Palestinian nationalism. Furthermore, they also embodied the PFLP's willingness to address an allegedly more "Islamised Palestinian public".[119]

The PFLP's attitude towards the rising Islamist movement in the first years of the Intifada highlighted the adoption of a shifting line and a misconception of the challenge that Hamas in particular posed to the PLO. Pursuing its goal of undermining the position and credibility of the PLO, Hamas always saw its contacts with the PFLP as instrumental to fostering internal divisions; from this also stemmed Hamas' view of the PFLP as a junior part in the association attempts that followed the Oslo accords.[120] The PFLP's unquestionable loyalty to the PLO further complicated its positioning towards the Islamists and in general within the Palestinian national movement. The traditional role of "loyal opposition" quickly lost its theoretical and practical role in the light of Hamas and Islamic Jihad's rise as new radical opposition to the PLO leadership. In the mid-1980s this position was due to the PFLP's attachment to "PLO legality" in order to contrast what it saw as Arafat's deviations from the correct PLO nationalist line. With the rise to prominence of the OPT as the new

centre of conflict and the emergence of a powerful force outside the PLO framework, the PFLP's focus on "respect for national institutions" lost at least some of its political urgency. Consequently, the PFLP's agency appeared more and more stuck between Fatah's agenda, centred on opening a process of political settlement with Israel, and Hamas' challenge to this project. This problematic position remained unresolved for the PFLP throughout the following decade, causing the resurfacing of an uncertain policy concerning the Islamists, fluctuating between contrast and coordination.

Conclusions

The PFLP's conduct during the first three years of the Intifada reflected its inability to benefit from a relatively stronger position within this new scenario of Palestinian politics. The outbreak of the uprising, while setting the priority of achieving a political settlement of the conflict, shielded the PLO from outside interferences and put it on an equal footing vis-à-vis all the actors involved. In this context, the PFLP showed pragmatism in adapting its line to the objectives articulated by the movement in the OPT. This, while reflecting the PFLP's local entrenchment, also demonstrated a certain ability to renew its political line and discourse. Therefore, as Arafat hurried to enter into negotiations, the PFLP had a chance to revive its credentials, emerging as the main PLO force committed to the protection of the Intifada revolutionary ethos. Thus, the PFLP could mount a more convincing opposition to the PLO leadership's efforts to capitalise on the uprising. Moreover, the radicalisation that the upheaval experienced in its second year due to Israeli repression, the hesitation of US-Palestinian dialogue and popular scepticism towards the peace process might have played in the PFLP's interests. However, while new sources of tension fostered the reappearance of the PFLP's fluctuations, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to have an overall influence on its agency.

First, the external PFLP leadership was unwilling to split the PLO, after the mid-1980s Palestinian infightings, Arafat's "individualist" turn and the self-exclusion of the PFLP from the highest PLO institutional bodies. Therefore, the PFLP's leadership favoured cohesion with the PLO Right, rather than confrontation. In this approach, it is possible to detect an attitude that the PFLP continued to show after the advent of the Oslo era and still possibly displays today. The PFLP's "desperation for relevance",

combined with its historical adherence to integration within the PLO, prevented a breakaway from the PLO mainstream, notwithstanding its violations and authoritarian practices.[121] The PFLP's policies towards the PLO leadership thus appeared uncertain, as the token opposition stances adopted during the 19th PNC and the US-Israel-PLO indirect dialogue exemplified.

Secondly, the tension stemming from the PFLP's own "inside-outside" divide contributed to policy fluctuation. The PFLP external leadership's concern for integration in the PLO combined with the internal divide to undermine its overall political strength. While officially calling for nation-wide civil disobedience, the PFLP leadership did not challenge directly Arafat's policies as the PFLP-OPT wished. Such reluctance ultimately distanced the two segments of the PFLP. The exiled leaders were unwilling to encourage a new generation of cadres capable of threatening their control over the organisation. In addition, bureaucratisation and rent-seeking started to affect the PFLP fostering doubts among the base militants.

Thirdly, the PFLP maintained an unclear position towards the Islamists, and notably Hamas, as they asserted their prominence, shifting from total rejection to partial acceptance. Moreover, the rise of political Islam exacerbated the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma. The emergence of Palestinian forces outside the PLO aroused the PFLP's concern for the preservation of PLO integration and the relevance stemming from it. At the same time, it started to question the PFLP's own oppositional role. The PFLP's fluctuating positions on the Islamist camp undermined the effectiveness of the faction's agency and proved a further burden in the task of relaunching its role within the Palestinian national movement.

Throughout the first three years of the Intifada it became clear that the PFLP was unable to fully exploit this chance to renew its political initiative. As a result, although the uprising continued until the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993, the PFLP had by 1990 expended most of the political capital accumulated during the 1980s. In the early 1990s, its political action was stuck in an impasse, unable to constrain nor participate in the PLO's leadership decisions. The PFLP's marginalisation, stemming from the missed opportunities of the First Intifada, would soon reveal its consequences as Arafat managed to impose a secretly negotiated deal with Israel to the rest of the PLO. Outbid in its oppositional role by Hamas, the PFLP would find itself trapped in its unquestioned loyalty to the PLO platform, suffering from the discredit of traditional Palestinian institutions while reaping little benefit from participation.

Notes

1. This is a reference to the controversy over the nature of the First Intifada that animated academic, media and official debates during the first years of the uprising. In-depth studies on Palestinian society in the OPT, the evolution of resistance activities there and ties between local and external actors of the Palestinian national movement denied some claims made by US and Israeli scholars and commentators. Particularly inconsistent were those arguments that tended either to overemphasise the spontaneity of the Intifada, underlining the alleged absence of an actual PLO role, or to ascribe the responsibility of the revolt to "external agitators". In both cases the goal was to depict the PLO as an external force in the OPT in order to downplay its political status. Such claims may be found in works like: Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising - Israel's Third Front* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster Ltd., 1990). Graham Fuller, *The West Bank of Israel. Point of No Return* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1989).
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CHAPTER 5

The Advent of the Peace Process: From Rejection to Acceptance of the "Palestinian Versailles"

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to permeate the PFLP's political agency. Major external events, from the Gulf War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, to the 1993 Oslo accords complicated its relationship of conflict and dependence with Palestinian institutions. Furthermore, the Oslo era saw the strengthening of tensions emerged during the First Intifada, such as the contrast between the exiled leadership and activists in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) or the polarisation between the Arafat-led "peace camp" and the Islamist opposition. The main result of such developments was the perpetuation of policy fluctuation which manifested itself both concerning the overall issue of rejection or acceptance of the post-Oslo political reality and in relation to other specific issues.

The signals of the PFLP's critical moment were clear during its 1993 Fifth National Congress. Faced with unprecedented global and regional developments, the leadership displayed a conservative approach that kept actual change at bay and left the PFLP ill-equipped to analyse the new phase and provide the appropriate response. Therefore, when the PLO and Israel signed the Declaration of Principles (DoP), the PFLP reacted deploying its traditional set of policies to oppose Arafat's "deviations", namely calling for a broad, nationalist front aimed at claiming back the violated legitimacy of Palestinian institutions.

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The PFLP's attempt to delegitimise the Oslo peace process on the PLO institutional level reflected its own dependence on such institutions, hinting to an exacerbation of the opposition-integration dilemma. This would emerge evidently during the short-lived experiment of coalition with Palestinian Islamist forces. The PFLP and the DFLP, coalesced in the Unified Leadership, shared the rejection of the Oslo accords with the Islamists, but different views on the PLO kept them separated. As a result, the variegated opposition to the peace process failed to exert an effective influence on the newly established Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The PFLP's focus on Palestinian institution also highlighted its conflicted relationship with the grassroot national movement in the OPT and emerged as a clear symptom of growing estrangement from Palestinian masses.

The ineffectiveness of the PFLP opposition to the Oslo accords and its state-building process strengthened its ever-present thrust to maintain integration in Palestinian institutions. The PFLP started to gradually accept the new political reality and moved to find a settlement with Fatah and within the new Palestinian polity. Oscillating between rejection and acceptance, between calls for mass mobilisation and botched political manoeuvring, the PFLP's course of action looked erratic. By the end of the decade, its loyalty to PLO institutions stopped paying off and with the emergence of a non-PLO Palestinian alternative, the PFLP's oppositional role appeared increasingly in question and so did its possibilities to reverse marginalisation.

The PLO Between International Vulnerability and a Fading Intifada

The overall precarious condition in which the PLO acted at the beginning of the 1990s had a direct impact on the PFLP. Outstanding external developments affected the Palestinian national movement negatively, marking the final years of the First Intifada while contributing to the exacerbation of the PFLP's own dilemmas.

The PLO decided to convene the PNC 20th session between 23 and 28 September 1991, three years after the 19th, "Intifada session" that declared the independence of the State of Palestine. This declaration reflected the positive momentum of the popular uprising in the OPT, the real possibility of seeing the end of Israeli occupation within a few years.

Three years later, while the Intifada was still ongoing, the PLO appeared severely weakened and the new PNC session reflected this condition. If during the 19th PNC, the PLO proposed its own peace initiative and made its bid for statehood clear, the 20th session merely provided a positive response to US Secretary of State Baker's proposal to convene a regional peace conference, underscoring the PLO passive stance. The US plan entailed the formation of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation in order to bypass Israel's refusal to sit at the same table with the PLO as well as forbidding the participation of any delegate from Jerusalem and the diaspora.[1] Although this meant diluting the PLO's representative role and possibly excluding many Palestinians from the equation, the Palestinian leadership believed it was necessary to deal with the "current situation" with a "spirit of political responsibility and nationalist realism".[2] In other words, some previously irrevocable preconditions could now be dropped. This weaker position was the consequence of several global and regional developments that compromised the PLO's political strategy, its resources and its overall condition.

In summer 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and in response, the US army launched a full-scale military operation to restore Kuwaiti independence. The PLO vocally supported Iraq, mainly due to Saddam Hussein's widespread popularity among the Palestinian population, but this step backfired painfully. As the second Gulf war ended with a predictable Iraqi retreat, the PLO not only lost the support of the last "confrontational" Arab regime, but also saw its main financial backers in the Gulf withdrawing their funding and, especially in the case of Kuwait, expelling the numerous Palestinian communities in retaliation.[3]

Furthermore, the gradual decline of the Soviet Union and its final dissolution in December 1991 saw the end of all counterweight to US influence in the Middle East, making Washington emerge as the only broker for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The new US global dominance was reflected in the organisation of a peace conference in Madrid, in November 1991. Both during the Gulf War, and during the ensuing diplomatic efforts to organise the Madrid conference, the USSR fully collaborated with the United States, marking the advent of an American-dominated phase in the Middle East peace process.[4]

The overall negative situation of the Intifada in the OPT only added to the PLO's vulnerability. Although protests and clashes between demonstrators and the Israeli army occurred on a daily basis, the Intifada was in stalemate, unable to produce further political results. The Israeli arrest and

killing campaigns eliminated many experienced leading activists, while at the same time the PLO Chairman consistently pursued a policy aimed at fragmenting the national movement in the OPT in order to concentrate power in his own hands. For this reason, Arafat allocated PLO funds to institutions and personnel according to political loyalty, much to the detriment of genuine resistance activities. These two factors ultimately contributed to the decline of the "mass character" of the Intifada favouring its militarisation and jeopardising the political effectiveness of popular protests.[5] In this overall negative context, the PFLP tried to reformulate its own political line in the wake of its failure to achieve significant advantages during the ascending phase of the First Intifada.

The PFLP's Uncertainty on the Eve of Oslo

If the PLO leadership had to cope with a crisis of unprecedented dimensions, the PFLP had to face even more unfavourable conditions. This was ascribable to its political line over national and regional issues as well as to its limited political and economic resources compared to Fatah. The PFLP was entering another period of major challenges, without the impetus the Intifada had offered four years earlier. This aspect could only emphasise the fluctuating character of the PFLP's response to such challenges, producing uncertain policies towards other Palestinian actors, often inconsistent with the slogans formulated.

The PFLP deeply felt the backlash of the Gulf War both politically and economically. First, the outcome of the American offensive highlighted the PFLP's miscalculation in assessing the regional and global balance of power: as the Cold War order vanished, the PFLP saw in the rise of Iraq an alternative counterweight to US-Israeli and Arab "reactionary" interests. That is why the PFLP leadership supported a simultaneous solution to the Gulf Crisis and the Palestinian issue.[6]

Secondly, the economic fallout from the Gulf War hit the PFLP very hard. Since the Palestine National Fund represented the main source of income for the faction, the cut of Gulf countries' financings to the PLO was particularly felt. In addition, Arafat's neopatrimonial management of funds apparently increased starting from 1991 to 1992. According to PFLP cadres in the OPT, the disruption of the regular flow of funds was due to the PLO Chairman's intention to curb internal opposition to the peace process.[7] Since 1988–89 Arafat bolstered his leverage in the national movement in the OPT by increasing significantly the allocation of funds to activities in the

OPT while excluding local bodies, such as the UNLU, from managing PLO finances.[8] In the following years, Arafat's neopatrimonial tendencies accentuated, especially after the establishment of the PNA, and such economic conduct was perceived also by PFLP cadres located in the diaspora.[9]

Hence, the PFLP's stand during the 20th PNC exposed this difficult status and its leaders did not hide their frustration in commenting on the Council's resolutions. For Habash, such resolutions were "not a Palestinian [peace] initiative, but just a response to Baker's plans". The PFLP feared exclusive US control on the peace process and was afraid that the PLO leadership's pliability would pave the way to the abandonment of central Palestinian demands such as an end to settlement activity or the inclusion of Jerusalem in discussions.[10] Despite these concerns, the PFLP appeared powerless in front of the PLO leadership during the 20th PNC. Incapable of presenting an effective political opposition and hesitating on withdrawal from the PLO institutions, the PFLP insisted on building up "grassroots unity", or to say with its slogan "the unity of rocks and Molotov cocktails", focusing its efforts on the "struggle side" rather than on the "diplomatic side" of PLO activities.[11] The formulation of these goals implied that the PFLP still trusted in the Intifada's potential to change the balance within the PLO in favour of a more "confrontational" stance in the long term. Despite such confidence in the uprising, PFLP-affiliated organisations in the OPT did not count for most of the national movement and alongside other organisations were experiencing the fatigue of the ongoing uprising. Between 1989 and 1992, the Israeli military launched several waves of arrests and deportations that took a heavy toll on the PFLP's first ranks in the OPT.[12]

Moreover, the external leadership did not have full control on its local branches either. The rise of armed groups whose main mission was targeting Israel's Palestinian collaborators was proof of such loose grip. The "Red Eagle Group", one of the most active among this kind of organisations, claimed affiliation with the PFLP but was established independently from the leadership. Local, young PFLP cadres, such as Ayman al-Rizza and 'Ilm al-Din Shahin, were behind the creation of the group and acted autonomously.[13] Although the PFLP supported its actions against collaborators' networks,[14] the Red Eagle Group was not accountable either to the external leadership or to the PFLP's representatives in the OPT and UNLU. This emerged clearly when the UNLU itself issued calls for restraint after these groups' behaviour appeared increasingly arbitrary.[15]

The PFLP's attention was turned away from the OPT by the PLO Central Council official decision to join the Madrid conference based on US and Israeli terms.[16] Following the PLO leadership's relinquishment of its minimum demands to join the new American initiative, the PFLP replied by "freezing" its membership of the Executive Committee. According to Politburo member Abd al-Rahim Malluh, the suspension protested the "executive leadership" decision to join a peace plan aimed at implementing nothing less than the 1979 Camp David provisions for Palestine which only mentioned "self-administration" and not statehood. However, once again the PFLP's reluctance to disengage from the PLO emerged clearly. Malluh and Habash, in a joint press conference, clarified that the membership freeze did not compromise the unity of the PLO, despite apparently irreconcilable differences. When asked about the convergence of interests with Hamas and the pro-Syrian factions, the two leaders specified that these contacts wanted to explore a common strategy to stand up to the PLO Chairman, but that the PFLP by no means sought to establish an alternative to the PLO.[17]

Nevertheless, coalition politics re-emerged as a way for the PFLP to resist Fatah supremacy. The PLO's full acceptance of American demands raised criticism within the DFLP, so Hawatmeh's organisation agreed to coordinate again with the PFLP. The shift towards the PFLP was also encouraged by Yasser Abd Rabbo's secession, along with other DFLP cadres, and his creation of a new faction, the Democratic Palestinian Union (Fida), closer to Fatah. After this split, the DFLP leadership could not support the peace process openly and decided to side with the opposition at first.[18] Thus, while the PCP mounted the peace bandwagon, the PFLP and DFLP issued a joint statement along with the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) and the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF). The four factions called all Palestinian forces to join them and reject the "self-government conspiracy" as well as to open "a dialogue comprehensive of all national and Islamist orientations" aimed at paving the way to a more inclusive PLO.[19]

In sum, on the eve of the 1993 Oslo accords, the PFLP's agency continued to be strained by the tension deriving from the conflict between its loyalty to the PLO framework and its rejection of the "peace process". Indeed, the PFLP's problems in formulating a practicable line and responding to the major changes affecting the Palestinian national movement emerged clearly during its Fifth National Congress.

The Conservatism of a Revolutionary Organisation: The PFLP's Fifth National Congress

During its Fifth National Congress some core problems affecting the PFLP in the first half of the 1990s emerged with clarity. The PFLP's shortcomings in addressing ideological and political change highlighted the connection between factors fostering adherence to the PLO framework and those hindering renewal.

The PFLP held its 1993 National Congress in Damascus, from 12 to 17 February and dedicated it to the "Martyrs of the Intifada". Twelve years after its previous congress, the PFLP could not postpone the new round any longer given the historical developments that the Palestinian national movement was experiencing. The declining trajectory of the Intifada, the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc and the apparently irresistible US "peace machine" were all issues putting the PLO at a fateful crossroads.[20] The PFLP, for its part, needed to redefine its basic theoretical, political and military orientations as well as reviewing its structure and leadership in order to stand up effectively to such threatening historical events. Nonetheless, many obstacles stood in front of genuine change such as the total absence of strategic planning over the previous decade, the continued grip of first-generation cadres on the Politburo, the ideological challenges stemming from the USSR's downfall and the rise of political Islam. Such obstacles were all intertwined but particularly, the predominance of the founding group, and their political experience, was tightly connected with the lack of strategic thinking.

The PFLP leadership's experiences during its Lebanese period played a paramount role in the prevalence of tactic over strategy. After the relocation from Jordan to Lebanon in the early 1970s, and especially since the outbreak of civil war in 1975, one of the main PLO priorities was to preserve the political, economic and military authority that it had established within the country. The mutating scenario of the Lebanese conflict, marked by multiple external interventions and shifting alliances, heavily influenced the decision-making process. This often resulted in "event-driven" policies aimed at the survival of the PLO quasi-state infrastructure in Lebanon.[21] Besides this, the PFLP was more sensitive to all forms of external pressure, given its smaller popular base and more limited resources compared to Fatah. In addition, the PFLP's Marxism and its tight links with the Lebanese Left fuelled much more hostility within the Lebanese Right than Fatah's loosely defined nationalism, increasing its exposure to

security threats.[22] The prioritisation of survival acquired even more importance for the PFLP after the eviction from Beirut following the 1982 Israeli invasion. In the mid-1980s "liquidation" for the PFLP could come either from hostile forces in the region or from a possible success of Arafat's diplomatic strategy, not to mention the controversial relation with the new Syrian host.[23]

The Lebanese period is central to understand the PFLP's problems with strategy not only because of its political trajectory during these years. The PLO's evolution from a revolutionary movement to a quasi-state entity had deep repercussions on the PFLP's internal structure and practice, fostering a bureaucratisation of its membership and leadership. The creation of more structured institutions, and notably, the funds flowing to the PFLP through PLO channels encouraged the "professionalisation" of political activism much to the detriment of revolutionary ethos.[24] Consequently, the preservation of bureaucratic structures, and the related benefits, became a concern that tacitly influenced the PFLP's agency and represented an obstacle to change. Furthermore, the bureaucratic structure also represented an instrument for the leadership to exert a stronger control on the faction's membership.[25]

Therefore, the PFLP's need to maintain integration within the PLO institutions, and the bureaucratisation of its structure, tightly linked to such a need, fostered a conservative approach in the PFLP leadership. As a result, the congress was unable to make a thorough review of the PFLP's trajectory and lay the foundation of a renewed party with a renewed strategy. In light of this failure, the PFLP held even less appropriate political means to face the phase that opened after September 1993.

Marxism-Leninism Reconfirmed

The PFLP's undisputed adherence to Marxism-Leninism has been often described as the consequence of a dogmatic approach to political ideology.[26] However, such adherence rather reflected the PFLP leadership's interest in ensuring control over the Front. Besides, the continuous recourse to Marxist and Maoist analytical categories served the PFLP's need to justify policy shifts. The Fifth National Congress and the lack of significant ideological renewal underscored the need of the PFLP's top leaders to maintain their grip during such a critical phase. As further evidence of this, the PFLP resorted to Marxist analysis to support a political

narrative that justified its traditional role within the PLO and deflect criticisms, particularly concerning the issue of party bureaucratisation.

The crisis of global Marxism following the USSR's collapse sparked different degrees of ideological reform within the Palestinian Left. This ranged from the PCP's transformation into the Palestine People's Party (PPP) and its abandonment of Marxism-Leninism, to re-evaluation of "democratic centralism" within the DFLP.[27] Conversely, the PFLP confirmed its main ideological cornerstones, proceeding with only a mild critique of selected aspects. According to the theoretical document of the Fifth Congress, the validity of Marxism, and its "scientific reading of society" as the starting point of political *praxis* was not to be questioned as it represented a "living model, not a frozen doctrine".[28] The adoption of "historical dialectical materialism" entailed that the PFLP's Marxism was in "a continued, dialectical relation with the reality and the *praxis*", enabling the party not only to comprehend societal and historical changes but also formulate a proper political response. By virtue of this founding principle, Marxism was still "an idea favourable to the interests of the working class, an ideology for the revolutionary change of society and a practice for radical transformation".[29] However, in 1993, the PFLP was by no means the proletarian party it theorised in its early years.[30] The leadership was still mainly composed by figures with bourgeois backgrounds such as Habash himself or Abd al-Rahim Malluh. In addition, the bureaucratisation of the party membership that emerged during the Lebanese period and became highly controversial in the context of PLO economic hardships distanced the PFLP even further from the ideal proletarian organisation. The renewed emphasis on Marxism also contrasted with the PFLP's inclusive idea of the Palestinian national movement. Although the working class was again put at the centre of the liberation struggle, the PFLP believed that, given the contradiction between Palestinian national aspirations and the Zionist project, all sectors of Palestinian society and political arena could be considered as driving forces of the revolution.[31] However, as the secret talks that led to the Oslo accords and the resulting establishment of new Palestinian institutions would demonstrate, the PLO political leadership and its economic partners were mainly interested in acquiring control over the administration of the OPT and benefitting from normalisation with Israel. The PFLP failed to prioritise the contradiction between this position and the interests of either Palestinians in the diaspora or the lower strata of Palestinian society in the OPT. While the

first were totally ignored by the agreements, the second saw their conditions deteriorate under the Oslo economic regime.[32]

Notwithstanding the crisis affecting international Marxists, the PFLP saw in the degeneration of the Soviet model the main reason behind the problems of Marxism worldwide. According to its view, the advent of Stalinism enshrined the hegemony of bureaucrats within the Party, which ceased to represent the proletariat and started reflecting the interests of Party elites and, ultimately, of state power. This negative trend was further exacerbated during the Brezhnev era when the Party leadership and the Secretary-General "became the sole source of authority sanctioning the correct line". Palestinian and Arab Marxists' were mistaken in following Soviet Marxism as an "undisputable dogma". The only criticism that the PFLP addressed to its own conduct concerned its inability to spread the correct interpretation of Marxism as an "evolving political praxis rather than a frozen dogma" due to "negative historical circumstances". Beyond that, the Congress theoretical document contained only vague calls for the democratisation and renewal of Party structure and invited its members not to see it as the only authority establishing the correct vision of Marxism, two steps needed to unify Palestinian Marxists.[33]

The absence of real ideological renewal highlighted the sharp contradictions between the PFLP's discourse and practice, evidencing how adherence to Marxism was an instrument of factional control. Such a tendency also clearly emerged in the PFLP's attempts to address organisational reform.

Same Structure, Same Programme and Same Leadership

The Congress documents on organisational structure and the programme for the new phase reflected even more clearly the PFLP's conservative approach. The insistence on traditional organisational and political principles underscored the lack of major reorientation in the PFLP's line. In turn, this appeared linked with the leadership's priority of ensuring its control during the new stage.

The organisational report of the congress emphasised the concept of "transformation" to adapt the PFLP to the current political circumstances. The adoption and spread throughout the PFLP's structures and membership of dialectic materialism was seen as an adequate mechanism to achieve

this transformation, without the need to actually change the structure of the organisation. The main PFLP bodies remained unchanged and so did relations among them. Despite renewed stress on implementing "collective leadership" at all levels, the concept of "democratic centralism" was restated various times.[34] The reaffirmation of this concept contrasted with calls for democratisation and the denunciation of "party ideological dictatorship" and personality cult that PFLP cadres themselves spelled out during the congress. The decision-making process within the PFLP has always been very hierarchical with the Politburo, and often the Secretary-General dictating the line, without consideration or toleration of internal divergences.[35] This not only contributed to the early defections, but also prevented the emergence of a new leadership from the experience of the Intifada in the OPT. During the congress itself several cadres were elected as new Politburo and Central Committee members, but none of these came from the OPT, underscoring the "outside" resolve to maintain predominance over the "inside".[36] In doing so, the PFLP failed to achieve change where it was most needed, namely in the grip on power of the external leadership and in its attitude towards promoting the role of grassroots leaders.

The political programme issued by the congress highlighted again the shallowness of the PFLP's policy review process. The document alternated recurring goals such as the fight against solutions based on the Camp David blueprint and working for the preservation of the PLO unity, to objectives which had emerged during the Intifada like the empowerment of popular institutions and promoting resistance in the OPT as the main stage of the conflict. All the points listed ultimately referred to the historical goal of preventing the "liquidation of the Palestinian cause" that became more significant than ever in light of the PLO leadership's commitment to the US peace plan.[37] However, such juxtaposition of slogans from different phases of the PLO trajectory was telling of the lack of strategic planning while, at the same time, it aimed at conferring a nominal comprehensiveness to the PFLP's programme.

The PFLP's poor planning effort was strictly related to its analysis of relations with the PLO leadership in the new phase. Consistent with its rejectionist position, the PFLP emphasised the dangers stemming from the PLO leadership's policies and full adherence to the US settlement project. Furthermore, the PFLP also identified the unprecedented concentration of power into Arafat's hands as one of the main reasons behind PLO acceptance of the peace process. Nonetheless, the PFLP's analysis

failed to reach the core issue lying at the basis of Arafat's unreserved embrace of the Madrid process. The Chairman was eager to strike a deal that would transform the PLO into a governing entity, salvaging it from the decline of the post-Gulf War phase.[38] Apparently ignoring this shift, the PFLP conceived its relationship with the "bourgeois, executive leadership" as regulated by a dialectical "unity-conflict-unity process". The PLO, fully considered as a liberation front, was still a viable umbrella, overarching all political and class differences under the prominence of the "contradiction" with Israel.[39] Following this analytical misconception, the PFLP ascribed the causes of the main PLO ills, such as the bureaucratisation of its personnel, to the misbehaviour of a professionalised elite rather than to long-standing problems that concerned directly the PFLP too. Consequently, the spread of corruption and rent-seeking, which in turn favoured support for a political settlement under US conditions, were due to the "bourgeois elements" that had been holding continuously the reins of power and that negatively influenced broad sectors of the national movement beyond the leading circle.[40] In other words, the PFLP held Arafat and his circle of Fatah and independent associates responsible for such negative trends. Adopting this point of view, however, the PFLP failed to acknowledge its own embroilment into the bureaucratisation process. Although to a lesser extent compared to Fatah, the PFLP's cadres, especially those based in the diaspora, were affected by rent-seeking patterns which fuelled a conservative approach in policy production.[41] Therefore, the dependence of the PFLP's structure on PLO funds undermined the formulation of and support for policies that questioned the framework ensuring the party's own finances.

By the same token, the PFLP's conception of relations within the PLO determined its line towards both the other "democratic opposition forces" and the non-PLO Islamist organisations. Concerning relations with the leftist factions, the PFLP affirmed that although tighter collaboration should be sought in order to stand up to the "bourgeois leadership" this should not come at the expense of "common, national action to tackle the main contradiction with Israel".[42] Such position reflected the PFLP's reluctance to work for a genuine coalition with the rest of the Left, and particularly the DFLP, raising serious doubts on the new, post-Oslo attempts at coordination. On the one hand, the "fundamental contradiction" with the enemy was invoked to discourage excessive intra-leftist coordination which supposedly would have a detrimental influence on national unity. On the other, the PFLP presented such contradiction as a

base for an understanding with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in order to work together against "liquidatory plans". However, the congress political report did not develop the idea any further, signalling the PFLP's lack of clarity regarding the Islamists and its inability to acknowledge the challenge posed to the PLO by those forces, especially Hamas.[43]

To conclude, three, interrelated problems emerged during the 1993 PFLP's Fifth National Congress. First, the PFLP did not take any resolution having a strategic depth, nor was it able to renew the membership of its leading bodies. The PFLP leadership, locked in a stalemate worse than that experienced by the PLO leadership, was unable to conceive a long-term political line. The study of the new phase and its understanding was identified as a mission per se and the mechanical implementation of certain principles, dialectic materialism above all, was seen as an automatic way to achieve change. Secondly, the fundamental tension between collaboration with the "bourgeois leadership" and conflict with it shaped the PFLP's analysis of the new phase. The inability to resolve this tension paralleled the party's failure to resolve its main internal contradiction, namely that stemming from its role of opposition faction yet fully committed to and dependent on the PLO establishment. Finally, these two features emerging from the 1993 congress appeared connected to the PFLP leadership concern for its power within the organisation. The lack of organisational and programmatic renewal as well as the reiteration of traditional views of the PLO were related to the preservation of the status quo within the PFLP, thus to the preservation of control in the hands of the exiled leadership.

"Peace" in Oslo

The PLO-Israel peace accord, and the way it was negotiated, not only attracted PFLP rejection but apparently provoked a break within the PLO. As this had been the case in the past, the PFLP conceived its opposition to Oslo as a fight for the PLO institutions, which needed to be redeemed following Arafat's unprecedented violations of its laws and principles. While signalling the PFLP's concern for integration, this position would also complicate its own policy making in a context of growing polarisation between the PLO mainstream and a rising Islamist opposition, unbound to traditional allegiances.

The Declaration of Principles (DoP) signed by the PLO and Israel in September 1993 represented, for wide sectors of the Palestinian national

movement, what Edward Said called "an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles".[44] Such a negative view of the historical agreement, achieved through almost a year of secret negotiations in the Norwegian capital Oslo, was due to the PLO Chairman's acceptance of some of the most unfavourable conditions ever proposed to the PLO by its US and Israeli counterparts. The official renunciation of armed struggle, the acceptance of self-administration instead of statehood and the exclusion of core issues such as the fate of Palestinian refugees or the end of Israeli settlement activity were seen as a suppression of the Palestinian people's rights. Moreover, the accords represented the relinquishment of what the PLO had achieved in terms of international law safeguarding Palestinian rights. The DoP referred only to the narrowest interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 while ignoring any other resolution on the conflict. This meant that Arafat renounced most of the legal tools to advance the Palestinian case on core aspects of the conflict such as the modes and timing of Israel's withdrawal from the OPT.[45]

Inevitably, the PFLP joined the variegated group of opponents of the Oslo accords. In George Habash's words, "Arafat signed the act of humiliation and betrayal, the surrender of our people's rights to return, to independence and to the state; (…) a victory they [the Israelis] never dreamt of".[46] More specifically, for the PFLP, the concession of the PLO leadership over the issues of refugees, settlements and the end of the Intifada embodied its estrangement from the PLO liberation programme and denial of its National Charter.[47] This, in the PFLP's view, was tantamount to losing completely the legitimacy stemming from the "nationalist" tasks undertaken by the PLO throughout its historical trajectory. Again, the PFLP and the PLO leadership had contrasting conceptions of legitimacy deriving from different understandings of the PLO's essence as an institution. While the PFLP still adhered to "revolutionary" sources of legitimacy, Arafat and his circle sought to justify their line through the international recognition that the Oslo accords received.[48]

The PFLP did not reject the DoP only because of its ideological underpinnings and its envisaged provisions to create a Palestinian self-administering authority. The secret Oslo negotiations and the signing of the accords represented another landmark in the PFLP's marginalisation process, similar to Arafat's unilateral convocation of the 17th Amman PNC, when without a prior consensus among the PLO factions, the Chairman succeeded in imposing his diplomatic line over the whole organisation.[49] Through the Amman PNC, Arafat dismissed the founding PLO

principle of consensus politics; through the Oslo accords, he dismissed any need for PLO sanction whatsoever. The DoP represented a *fait accompli* that the PLO leadership imposed to its leftist as well as its emerging Islamist opposition. Consequently, the PFLP was not only deprived of any meaningful role within the PLO but was also "outlawed" by the "new legality" set up in Oslo, unless it decided to join the incumbent political regime.

Implicitly acknowledging this development, the PFLP's Central Committee affirmed in its statement that "the leadership realised its political and economic interests through the direct linkage with the imperialist and the Zionist plans".[50] In the face of the new legitimisation mechanism that was being delineated, the PFLP expressed an initial refusal to take part. Abu Ali Mustafa clarified the position of his faction, confirming that the PFLP rejected an alleged request from Arafat to join his institution-building efforts, though from a position of internal opposition. This would have meant helping the PLO Chairman confer additional credibility on his upcoming PNA. Arafat "broke all the bridges and destroyed all common denominators" and this made "impossible any encounter between his path and that of the PFLP".[51] From this position stemmed the PFLP's call for the formation of a "wider national front, for a wider representation". In other words, the PFLP aimed at rallying the remaining nationalist forces as well as Islamist movements to form a political bloc capable of competing for nationalist legitimacy with the PLO leadership.[52]

However, the task did not come without challenges and contradictions. This return to coalition politics drew much criticism because of past, failed experiences, as many deemed it a repetition of an outdated political rhetoric. The PFLP's leaders themselves admitted also the difficulty of building closer coordination with ideologically different partners such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. Besides, the PFLP's intention to claim the PLO for "those committed to its nationalist line" entailed an ultimate unwillingness to disengage from it, a position that contradicted with the Islamists' lack of interest in joining the PLO.[53] Finally, the PFLP also renewed its commitment to strengthen its grassroots activities and returned to stress the central role of armed struggle, this time in the OPT, as a mean to prevent Arafat from settling his "self-administering entity".[54] While focusing on grassroots mobilisation was an urgent necessity for a faction that was experiencing institutional marginalisation, this was to contrast paradoxically with the PFLP leadership's fear of being sidelined within the PLO institutions themselves. Indeed, because of this concern, the PFLP's

leaders in the diaspora risked prioritising a diplomatic and institutional battle against the ruling Fatah elite to the detriment of a long-term investment in the development of its popular base in the OPT.

PFLP-DFLP Coalition Reloaded

The post-Gulf War scenario confirmed the pattern regulating relations between the PFLP and DFLP: unity on the PLO level entailed distance and often competition between the two leftist factions, as observed during the First Intifada. Split between the "rightist" leadership and its opposition on the left brought coordination between the two Fronts, out of necessity. The rapprochement between the Popular and the Democratic Fronts started in the wake of the Madrid conference; in September 1992, the two organisations declared the formation of a Unified Leadership. Announcing the renewed unity of their leaderships, the PFLP and the DFLP set as their main priority the delegitimisation of the PLO Right. The formulation of such a goal underscored the pre-eminence for both factions of action on the institutional level, despite references to grassroots mobilisation.

From the prioritisation of institutional politics stemmed their calls for a referendum to gather the opinion of the "Palestinian masses" outside and inside the OPT on their future and national course, as well as for a general strike to reject the "self-administration project".[55] The idea of a referendum kept being raised by the PFLP throughout the eve and aftermath of the DoP but remained little more than rhetoric. Conversely, this specific call for a strike received some popular response, with stronger participation in the Lebanese and Syrian refugee camps and in Gaza, and a milder one in the West Bank and Jordan.[56] Nonetheless, a certain margin of action for the Unified Leadership seemed to emerge.

With the signing of the Oslo accords, the necessity of maintaining more consistent coordination became urgent. The PFLP needed to boost the credibility of the Unified Leadership and several displays of self-criticism came to underline the qualitative evolution of this new associative attempt. At this regard, Habash provided his analysis of the causes behind the failure of the Left in restraining the PLO leadership's concessions. Interestingly, the Secretary-General affirmed that "the leftist democratic alternative did not materialise because it had been unable to present itself, in its practice, as radically different from the Right". For this reason, explained Habash, a gap arose between the official programme and the actual agency of the leftist forces. Furthermore, he also noted that the

leftist factions should promote a new "national unity" based on "grassroots support and not on high-level contacts among the top cadres". This entailed pursuing a political practice prioritising a social programme around which popular support might be gathered. By virtue of this awareness, the PFLP and DFLP started a new associative effort that differed qualitatively from previous examples, especially in the light of the unprecedented challenge posed by the beginning of the peace process. The signing of the DoP enabled the Popular and Democratic Fronts to overcome their differences in "political tactics", underscoring their shared goal of preventing the implementation of the accords.[57] Talking about the "objective and subjective" reasons behind the need for leftist unity, Abu Ali Mustafa reiterated some of these arguments. In particular, he went even further in his criticism of the Palestinian Left by saying that relations among the leftist factions had often been marked by "practices whose *raison d'être* was simply factional interest". This contributed to confusing the difference between the "democratic forces" and "rightist bureaucratic apparatuses" that led the campaign towards a "liquidatory" solution.[58] In the light of this self-criticism, the PFLP appeared to push into the background the factionalism and contrast between the DFLP's "moderation" and its intransigence towards Fatah, two factors that contributed to previous failures.

The PFLP's analysis however did not acknowledge the basic flaws that hampered the action of the PLO Left in the past and would compromise its action in the current phase too. Both the PFLP's Secretary-General and his Deputy identified some major problems, especially in underlining the Left's inability to mark its distance from the PLO Right. Nonetheless, in doing so, they were once again unable, or unwilling, to emphasise the fundamental characteristics that the PFLP and DFLP shared with the Fatah leadership such as the bureaucratisation of the Fronts' personnel or the exiled leadership's overriding concern for self-preservation. For instance, bureaucratisation implied the PFLP and DFLP's dependence on the PLO structure, limiting the room for manoeuvre to the space within the national institutions. As soon as the two Fronts were confronted with their inability to restrain Fatah within this space, the effectiveness of their coordination could be automatically questioned, opening a return to individual initiative.

Ultimately, the formation of the Unified Leadership did recall the previous coalitions of leftist forces in terms of practices and political contents. Nevertheless, as a DFLP Politburo member explained, the two Fronts'

unification was necessary to secure a space for "democratic forces" in the reconfiguration of Palestinian politics prompted by the huge and divisive impact of the Oslo accords.[59] In other words, behind the goal of rebuilding the PLO institutions starting from an effective leftist, nationalist platform lay the PFLP and DFLP's hopes that such a reconfiguration would bring them increased political weight.

The PLO as an Obstacle of Islamist-Leftist Association

Besides their bilateral coordination, the Popular and Democratic Fronts continued to pursue their declared goal of forming a "broad front comprehensive of all democratic, nationalist and Islamist forces" opposed to the Oslo agenda. This led to increased contacts with Hamas and Islamic Jihad as well as with other opposition factions based in Syria, and to the formation of the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF) immediately after the DoP was signed. Since this first attempt at association, the main problems affecting Islamist-leftist relations emerged clearly. The experience of the APF evidenced to what extent PLO status represented the ultimate barrier to effective working relations between leftist and Islamist factions. In particular, the PFLP's participation in the APF highlighted how its adherence to the PLO framework, and the ensuing linkages with Fatah, clashed with its own opposition to the Palestinian leadership, shared with the Islamist camp. Consequently, this contradiction fostered policy fluctuation between superficial collaboration with Hamas and Islamic Jihad and dialogue with Fatah, the PLO and the PNA leadership.

The association of leftist factions with those who the PFLP defined as "fundamentalists" just few years earlier was another consequence of the reconfiguration of the Palestinian political camp that lay at the true core of the dispute with Fatah. In other words, apart from the "common denominator" of opposition to the Oslo accords, the coalition was born from the need to find new counterweights to Arafat, particularly in the PFLP's case.[60] Therefore, the main rationale pushing the PFLP towards an understanding with the Islamists lay in the realm of PLO "high politics", in the traditional conception that the opposition, unable to impose its line, could at least thwart the leadership's agenda through unconventional, tactical alliances. In the light of this overall goal, the PFLP also hoped to reach a more consistent "ground cooperation" with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in

order to set up joint actions in the OPT pressuring Fatah and the PLO leadership.[61]

Circumstances apparently forced the leftist and Islamist factions towards coordination; as evidence of this, it took several months before the different organisations managed to define the APF's organisational structure and provided it with an initial political programme. The formulation of the programme itself and the rules supposed to coordinate relations within the Alliance were telling of the considerable differences among its members. For instance, the APF was provided with a Central Leadership and a General Secretariat where two and one delegates respectively represented each faction during the meeting of these two bodies. This structure supposedly responded to the need for a collective decision-making process defining the APF's political line.[62] Nevertheless, it rather reflected the lack of common ground in terms of ideology and political priorities that prevented the establishment of a more efficient executive body. Such differences also surfaced in how the document defined the PLO, hinting at the long debate that took place before the right formulation was found. The PLO was defined as a "national achievement whose successes were to be preserved and its institutions rebuilt on a democratic basis".[63] This definition reflected how the PFLP, even if it was a junior part in it, did not see the alliance as a long-term framework of action. In fact, Habash himself continued to stress the PFLP's unwillingness to create "a new PLO", a position that underlined the ultimate contradiction between the PFLP and DFLP's allegiance to the PLO and the Islamists' autonomy from it.[64] Indeed, Hamas' rationale behind the attempted associations with the Palestinian Left was undermining the PLO cohesion and its credibility as representative institution. Given Hamas' historical goal of challenging the PLO on this ground, the Islamist faction tried to take advantage of internal PLO turbulence by actively contributing to its split.[65] From this position also stemmed Hamas' determination to be the leading force within the opposition camp by virtue of its wide popular base in the OPT. The PFLP, for its part, was arguably reluctant to disengage from a Fatah-dominated PLO to commit to a Hamas-dominated opposition. Consequently, these frictions further hindered the establishment of effective coordination on the ground in terms of military action, non-violent protest and political collaboration at a grassroots level.[66]

These obstacles affected negatively the development of the "broad front" which still failed to materialise, despite the progress of the Oslo agenda raising growing scepticism among Palestinian officials and public

opinion. Indeed, while the signing of the DoP received some significant support throughout the OPT, this was not the case for the Gaza-Jericho agreement signed in Cairo, in February 1994.[67] The PLO and Israeli officials gathered in the Egyptian capital to define the establishment of Palestinian self-rule on the designated area. This entailed a precise understanding on some sensitive issues such as border controls and the status of Israeli settlements in Gaza-Jericho. Ultimately, not only did Israel retain full control on both the borders with Egypt and Jordan, but also enlarged the size of areas around the settlements, which remained outside Palestinian administration. Once the details of the Cairo agreement were made public, popular discontent towards what was interpreted as capitulation became widespread in the OPT.[68] Moreover, the progress and popularity of the peace process experienced a more serious setback shortly after the Cairo agreement, when Baruch Goldstein, a settler affiliated to the Jewish far-right Kach movement, shot 29 Palestinian worshippers dead at the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron. The massacre was followed by popular uproar throughout the OPT and diaspora and protests soon started to target the Oslo accords as well. The Israeli crackdown on Palestinian demonstrations and the Rabin government's reluctance to tackle the settlers' movement, questioned the meaning of a peace process that was not ending Israel's repressive measures.[69] The PFLP-DFLP Unified Leadership described the crackdown as an "extension of the Ibrahimi mosque massacre" while Oslo represented a "framework to institutionalise the occupation and ensure the preservation of the settlements".[70]

Following these events, the Unified Leadership once more demanded Arafat's resignation and called for "democratic elections to select a new, legitimate leadership".[71] Afterwards, in a bid to bolster their challenge to the PLO leadership, the PFLP and DFLP drafted a "National Salvation Program", displaying their determination to pursue the unification process. The two factions intended this programme as a "base for a comprehensive dialogue" around which all opposition figures and organisations could gather. The document supported all means of struggle against occupation forces and called for the boycott of all the "self-administration authority" institutions. The takeover of the PLO, restructuring of its institutions and cancellation of the Oslo accords were set as the ultimate goals of the opposition front. The coalition, as envisaged in the programme, was to be founded on a democratic basis in contrast to the autocratic turn of the PLO leadership that led to the DoP and Oslo agreement. Therefore, the document proposed to hold conferences both inside and outside

Palestine to coordinate opposition activities.[72] If on the one hand, the National Salvation Program signalled the Left's attempt to form an alternative grouping within the PLO legitimated by its adherence to the "nationalist agenda", on the other, it also underscored the difficulties of the opposition in creating a more cohesive political body. Ultimately, this programme appeared as a more structured call for opposition unity but did not solve the organisational problems and political differences that afflicted the APF.

Throughout the second half of 1994, PFLP-DFLP relations appeared tighter than ever, and after the publication of the National Salvation Program, the Politburos of the two factions announced the implementation of "preparatory steps to form a united front" by the end of the year.[73] Conversely, the situation within the APF did not improve at all after the issuing of the programme and the PFLP's leaders publicly acknowledged the limits of the alliance. Abu Ali Mustafa simply affirmed that the "performance of the opposition was below the required level", while Politburo member Malluh maintained that "nobody expected that the establishment of any new grouping would have been enough to invert the balance of power within the PLO". He added that the APF "quickly demonstrated its inability to become an effective coalition capable of mobilizing the opposition (…) due to specific internal reasons".[74] The situation appeared even clearer for PFLP members in the OPT as demonstrated by Ghazi Abu Jiab, a Gazan activist who affirmed, as early as September 1994, that "the attempt by the Damascus-based leadership to forge an alliance [with Hamas] on the ground has proven a failure and is now over".[75] The condition of the APF did not improve during the following year, and by mid-1995, PFLP leaders declared the experience failed. According to Malluh, the opposition did not grasp the "common denominators" between the Islamist and nationalist forces stemming from the "aggression" that the "Oslo team" led to Palestinian unity. Consequently, the opposition factions were unable to overcome "tactical, ideological differences" since only coordination between organisations with common ideological background seemed viable.[76] However, this was not entirely true as the PFLP managed to maintain friendly relations with Islamic Jihad. This was evident in the space *Al-Hadaf* dedicated to interviews with Islamic Jihad's Secretary-General Fathi al-Shiqaqi. The Islamist leader was actually seen as a suitable partner for dialogue needed to "identify and overcome" the contradictions existing between the "democratic and Islamist currents".[77] In the PFLP's view, Islamic Jihad started to distinguish itself

from Hamas by prioritising "core nationalist, Palestinian values" over the Islamist social agenda.[78] Indeed, Islamic Jihad embraced the ideological heritage of the Palestinian national movement and retained its revolutionary, anti-imperialist discourse downplaying ideological and religious differences for the sake of the primacy of the national question. Islamic Jihad did not adopt political Islam as a total rupture with the legacy of the secular organisations that traditionally animated the Palestinian national movement, hence the coexistence of Maoist principles alongside the tenets preached by Ruhollah Khomeini within Islamic Jihad's political doctrine. Such an inclusive approach emphasised common points with the PFLP, in contrast with Hamas' focus on the "Islamisation of society" that motivated the scepticism of leftist factions.[79]

Beyond ideological differences, the issue of commitment to the PLO framework was at the core of the APF's unviability. The Islamist and leftist forces shared the same view of the Oslo accords but did not agree on their understanding of the PLO and traditional Palestinian institutions.[80] The Unified Leadership's unquestionable adherence to the PLO was at odds with Hamas and Islamic Jihad's priority of self-assertion and challenge to the Palestinian political establishment. This discordant point prevented, during this stage as well as throughout subsequent phases, any strategic coordination, leaving room only for occasional collaboration. Furthermore, in the PFLP's case, a short-lived involvement in the APF underscored the inconsistencies surfacing between shared political analyses and positions with the Islamists, concerning the PNA and common ground with Fatah, stemming from decades-long experience within the PLO.

Heights and Decline of the Unified Leadership: Joint Opposition, Separate Integration

In accordance with Malluh's considerations, the PFLP-DFLP's Unified Leadership remained active throughout the following years while the APF became mainly a label for the anti-Oslo organisations. The two Marxist factions continued to coordinate their positions and to adhere to an overall rejection of the peace process and the institutional steps that it entailed. 1996 represented a central year for the course of the Unified Leadership, marking its highest point and the beginning of its demise. Between 1995 and 1997, short-term calculations weighed on the line of the Unified Leadership as well as on that of both the PFLP and the DFLP. Thus, the

demise of another coalition attempts confirmed the patterns governing the Popular and Democratic Fronts actions towards each other and their effort to reintegrate Palestinian institutions.

The PFLP and DFLP opposed the September 1995 Taba agreement (Oslo II) and, more significantly, both organisations decided to boycott the January 1996 general elections for the first Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and for the PNA President. Through the boycott, the Unified Leadership aimed at delegitimising the Oslo institutions and thus strike a severe blow to the PNA and to Arafat's agenda.[81] This coordinated boycott marked a high point in terms of collaboration between the Popular and Democratic Fronts. During the past experiences of coalition building, the two factions split on more than one occasion exactly on participation in official PLO events, notably the PNC, with the PFLP espousing a more intransigent stance and the DFLP willing to find a common ground with Fatah, notwithstanding its leader's "deviations".

Nonetheless, the PFLP and DFLP policies towards the general election resulted in a complete failure. The high election turnout (71.6% of total registered voters)[82] not only gave further legitimacy to Yasser Arafat but also jeopardised the precarious credibility of the Unified Leadership's political line.[83] Although the backlash of the failed boycott could have been fatal to PFLP-DFLP coordination, the two Fronts decided to maintain the unity of their Political Bureaus in the following months. The next step of the confrontation with the PLO leadership was to occur at the upcoming 21st session of the PNC, expected to vote on the Israeli-required amendments to the Palestinian National Charter, in particular the cancellation of "those articles of the Palestinian Covenant which [denied] Israel's right to exist".[84] Reaffirming the unity of the leftist opposition, George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh declared, during a rally marking the DFLP's 27th anniversary, their factions' rejection of "any amendment to the National Charter", a move that equated to "emptying the PLO of its nationalist and combatant content".[85]

However, in the wake of the 21st PNC session, the Unified Leadership started to lose its cohesiveness, although its leaders repeated that they were working on merging the two Fronts. Shortly after the conclusion of the PNC, the PFLP announced the suspension of its membership from all PLO institutions. The DFLP did not undertake such a step, showing its openness to re-establishing normal relations with Fatah.[86]

In June, signalling its willingness to enter the institution-building debate, the PFLP presented its own initiative to "reorganise the Palestinian

house". Short of options after Arafat's successes at the general elections and the PNC and trying to capitalise on concern raised by the takeover of a new Likud-led government in Israel, the PFLP hoped to garner support around its initiative among the different trends of Oslo critics. Therefore, the call for dialogue stressed on wide nationalist concerns, such as the protection of Jerusalem, the fight against the settlements and the protection of democracy within the new institutions. Despite its supposed centrality for the leftist agenda in the post-election scenario, this initiative was not the result of the PFLP-DFLP common platform, as only the PFLP's Central Committee issued and subscribed to it.[87] In March 1997, the PFLP participated again to the DFLP's celebration of the anniversary of its foundation, at which Hawatmeh restated his faction's support for the "Unified Leadership of the opposition".[88] By this time, however, the Popular and Democratic Fronts' union was more rhetorical than real and all projects of coalition or merger were de facto abandoned, only to be reconsidered again in the early 2000s.

The failure of the political line conceived in the framework of the Unified Leadership clearly had a major role in determining the PFLP and DFLP leaders' dissatisfactions with unity. If the exceptional nature of the Oslo accords as well as the strong emergence of the Islamist trend within Palestinian politics had fostered one of the longest examples of leftist coalitions, the ineffectiveness of its policies and the seemingly irresistible affirmation of the PLO Chairman's agenda managed to counterweight such unifying factors and contributed to the end of the Unified Leadership. The creation of a joint decision-making body served the goal of exerting greater institutional influence. After the general elections and the PNC, it became clear that the Unified Leadership could not achieve such an objective and consequently lost its fundamental political significance. In addition, factional distrust started to resurface, influencing contacts between the PFLP and DFLP's cadres, especially at a middle level and within the OPT. Both sides held the other accountable for the failure to build a new, unified organisation but they were in fact unwilling to renounce the positions of control that the leaders and cadres enjoyed in their original factions. In particular, DFLP members accused the PFLP's of displaying superiority towards them inasmuch as they considered their faction the leading force of the Palestinian Left. In turn, PFLP members condemned the DFLP's for their alleged willingness to adopt a softer position regarding the Oslo accords and PLO leadership in the hope of benefitting politically and economically from engaging in PNA institutions.[89]

With the breakup of the PFLP-DFLP Unified Leadership, the two factions pursued dialogue with Fatah and the PNA individually in order to "normalise" their relations and possibly explore the possibility of joining the Oslo institutions. The separate processes of reconciliation with Fatah allowed the differing views that the two Fronts held on the matter to emerge. While the PFLP was more cautious in its dialogue with Arafat's faction, the DFLP aimed at participating directly in the negotiating process with Israel as part of the PLO delegation.[90] Once again, the DFLP showed less concern in joining fully the PLO establishment, while the PFLP needed to display a warier attitude to preserve its image of hard-line opposition faction.

Ultimately, by engaging in this dialogue, the Popular and Democratic Fronts confirmed the pattern according to which the fragmentation of the Palestinian Left drove its main factions to reconsider their relations with the PLO mainstream in an attempt to find a settlement with it. In addition, the failure of the PFLP-DFLP oppositional agenda not only signalled a sudden shift in their orientations towards Fatah and the PNA. It also showed that the research and retention of PLO integration occurred on a factional basis, although engaging the old and new Palestinian institutions did not represent a divisive point between the PFLP and DFLP at this stage.

From Rejection to Acceptance

Throughout its membership of the PLO, the PFLP position towards Fatah line often evolved from total refusal to pragmatic acceptance of the *fait accompli*. In the trajectory leading to acceptance of the new political reality, the PFLP followed a pattern that kept occurring several times. Rejection is first followed by the attempt to form a counterweight to Fatah within the PLO by trying to establish a coalition with other factions. The coalition then appears increasingly unable to meet its own goals, allowing some of the Left's deep-rooted problems to emerge. The opposition alliance fails to attract enough popular support for its alternative programme, external sponsors tend to look at it as an instrument for expanding their own influence, while diverging interests and mutual distrust plague relations among factions. Because of this failure, a dialogue with the contending part starts on a bilateral basis, facilitated by the PFLP's historic concern for the preservation of PLO unity. Ultimately, the PFLP ends up accepting the new political status quo, sticking to the role of loyal opposition. Such acceptance leads in turn to a subsequent reframing of the political

narrative in order to justify the shift. Such a pattern represented the primary level of the PFLP's policy fluctuation and was directly linked to its opposition-integration dilemma.

The gradual shift from rejection to acceptance occurred, for instance, with the 1974 approval of the Ten Points Program, which prompted the PFLP's suspension of its participation in the PLO Executive Committee. Consequently, the PFLP became the main faction within the Rejection Front that aimed at opposing Fatah's "moderate" line. Inability to confront Arafat's faction within PLO institutional bodies and the difficulty of managing intra-factional relations prevented the Rejection Front from pursuing its main goal. These problems, coupled with broader regional developments, such as the Egypt-Israel Camp David agreement, finally determined the PFLP's acceptance of the Ten Points Program by 1979.[91] This pattern resurfaced again in the mid-1980s and, predictably, in the wake of the DoP and Gaza-Jericho agreement. In the post-Oslo phase, the acceptance process was gradual and, specifically, characterised by the predicament of finding a viable third way between the two "new" main poles of Palestinian politics, namely the PNA and its Islamist opposition, while shifting closer to one or the other according to the PFLP's political priorities. Therefore, the growing polarisation of post-Oslo Palestinian politics exacerbated the PFLP's policy fluctuation. In this context, the PFLP tended to adopt an official discourse condemning the overall tenets and establishment of the post-Oslo Palestinian politics and institutions, displaying a narrative closer to Hamas' view. At the same time, it submitted to the Oslo establishment by gradually joining some of its institutions, thus crossing de-facto the line that separated the PFLP from the "Oslo camp". Such predicament continued to mark the whole Palestinian Left's experience throughout the following decade and remains controversial today.

Re-Integrating the PLO to Preserve Authority

In the post-Oslo political scenario, the gradual shift towards acceptance of the new status quo started with the PFLP's early engagement in the political debate prompted by the first PNA measures. The PFLP thus started to intervene in the Oslo-driven state-building process and on the reorganisation of Palestinian institutions in the OPT. The PFLP started to accept post-Oslo politics, due to its concern to retain influence over local institutions, but also because of the exiled leadership's desire to reassert its

control over the PFLP's OPT branch. Both political and organisational divergences fuelled the inside-outside divide after the Oslo accords, and while this phenomenon affected all PLO factions, in the PFLP's case, it emphasised the oscillations of its political line.

Notwithstanding the PFLP's discourse around the "lost legitimacy of the PLO leadership" and the official boycott of the self-administration institutions, the first signs of PFLP-Fatah dialogue emerged late in 1994. Indeed, the PFLP agreed to hold talks with Fatah concerning the formation of municipalities in the OPT in the hope of retaining some influence within local institutions. Although ultimately the PFLP did not play a relevant role in the process, a first shift in its rhetoric occurred, showing how it was starting to accept the rules of post-Oslo Palestinian politics. As Arafat selected municipalities' staff according to political loyalty, a new priority for the PFLP was counteracting the "dictatorial" trends that characterised the installation of the PNA.[92]

Throughout 1995, the PFLP did not relinquish its condemnation of the "surrender path" undertaken by the PLO leadership, denouncing the Oslo process as a whole and expressing its rejection of the new agreements signed by the PLO and Israel.[93] In particular, it articulated concern over the Taba agreement, which envisioned the creation of three types of areas in the OPT, regulating and further limiting Palestinian sovereignty.[94] Nonetheless, the PFLP demonstrated its interest in engaging the political debate according to the new coordinates of Palestinian politics set by the Oslo accords. An example of this approach was provided by the PFLP's reaction to the publication of the draft law on political parties issued by the PNA.[95] The Unified Leadership issued a statement to express its disapproval concerning the bill, in which its condemnation stemmed partly from official opposition to the Oslo accords, but also from disagreement with the specific provisions included in the draft law itself. The Popular and Democratic Fronts condemned the bill because it was issued by an authority whose legitimacy derived from the Oslo process. At the same time, they criticised the PNA Presidency for drafting the law "in absence of a legislative authority". The PFLP called all critics, including Oslo supporters such as the PPP and Fida, to request the President to transfer his authority on the matter to the Committee for Parties Licensing. The issues of democracy and plurality resurfaced again, as the document denounced the authoritarian trends of the self-administration government that could veto the legalisation of political parties. In another sign suggesting acknowledgement of the new status quo, the Unified Leadership

questioned the Palestinian people on "what kind of state" they wanted to build in "this transitional phase".[96]

The January 1996 general elections represented a real turning point in the PFLP's acceptance of the new political context and showed the connection between shifts in policy orientation and the inside-outside divide. At this stage, delegitimising the Oslo process and Arafat's authority was still the main goal of the PFLP leadership. Therefore, the PFLP leaders could not take part in an electoral process whose main goals were demonstrating popular support for the peace accords and giving "Arafat a mandate" and "legitimacy to a new political order".[97] In the PFLP's view, the whole process simply provided a "nationalist cover" to yet another of "Israel's victories". Furthermore, the PFLP contested the democratic bases of the electoral process.[98] The electoral law had been imposed by the PNA's government without prior debate and the adoption of a "district-based, winner-take-all electoral system" favoured local elite groups as well as candidates affiliated to Arafat. These groups, despite their lack of national consensus, were able to exert strong leverage on a local basis through services provision and assistance to their constituencies. Conversely, the electoral system was more unfavourable to smaller PLO factions such as the PFLP, stronger on a national level but unable to compete on such a basis within each district.[99]

Notwithstanding this general stance in favour of a boycott, the PFLP leadership did not enjoy a full internal consensus. As during the First Intifada, local PFLP members did not agree with the line dictated by the external leadership. However, if during the uprising the emergence of such a division could be seen as a new phenomenon, in the post-Oslo phase it became structural and continued to concern all the PLO factions. Of all the elements that characterised the divide between the outside and the inside branches of the Palestinian national movement, the most significant was the different structure of political organisation and mobilisation. While in the diaspora political mobilisation tended to follow a "top-down" trend, with the political and military leaders prompting the engagement of the Palestinian masses, in the OPT the conditions experienced by the population favoured grassroots mobilisation. Outside the OPT, the PLO created those civil and military institutions that shaped diaspora civil society and enabled the political mobilisation of Palestinian refugees. The growth of the institutional dimension and the bureaucratisation process experienced during the Lebanese phase emphasised this aspect, as the PLO started to draw its legitimacy also from the performance of its

"quasi-state" functions. Conversely, in the OPT, occupation forces prevented the formation of fully structured political entities, favouring the spread of grassroots organisations such as trade unions and Popular Committees. This kind of political mobilisation fostered a more inclusive decision-making process that contrasted the hierarchical structure of the PLO executive bodies.[100]

Indeed, the inside-outside divide was more evident within Fatah, notably because Arafat relied on formerly Tunis-based cadres to set up the PNA institutions. A political battle broke out within the ranks of Fatah as general elections were being organised. The returnees tried to assert themselves over local leaders within Fatah's official lists, enjoying Arafat's full backing.[101] Although inside-outside competition was not so open within the PFLP, given the leadership's initial refusal to return to the OPT, the exiled leaders did actively obstruct the rise of possible internal competitors on several occasions. First, according to some reports, the PFLP aligned with other PLO factions during the 1991 20th PNC in obstructing a proposal by the PPP to allow more OPT activists to be represented within PLO institutions.[102] Furthermore, the PFLP's 1993 Fifth General Congress did not elect any OPT cadres to the Politburo or Central Council of the organisation. The external leadership's desire to cling to internal power was made clear following the debacle of the 1996 elections boycott. In the aftermath of the vote, the PFLP leadership started working to move its veteran leaders into the OPT, exploiting the new PNC's sessions as the first opportunity to fulfil this task.

Although a majority of the PFLP cadres supported the boycott, some local leaders feared that this step would further marginalise the PFLP. In particular, they sensed that most of leftist sympathisers in the OPT were in favour of participating in the electoral process. They were thus worried about the backlash of a PFLP's official boycott and the distance that this might put between the organisation and its supporters.[103] Such concern led some leaders in the OPT to urge the Politburo in Damascus to accept the new institutions and oppose Fatah and the other supporters of the peace process from inside the Oslo political regime. *Al-Hadaf*'s Editor-in-Chief Fahd al-Qudsi dismissed these concerns as simply mistaken because the priority for the opposition was "removing any nationalist justification" from the political operation that lay behind the elections.[104] However, among these OPT cadres, Ryad al-Malky and Ghazi Abu Jiab voiced publicly their opposition to the line adopted by the exiled leadership and decided to defy the orders coming from Damascus and run in the election.

Ultimately, al-Malky ceded to internal pressures and renounced to his candidature while Abu Jiab held his position and joined a Gaza list that saw Haydar Abd al-Shafi, the widely-respected former director of the Red Crescent Society, at its head.[105] The wide popular turnout of the elections finally proved mistaken all the PFLP leadership's calculations, underscoring its alienation from OPT grassroots politics. The blow was particularly severe for the whole leftist opposition because in fact, an overwhelming majority of its supporters casted their ballot and some of its local cadres gained seats as independents.[106] This demonstrated that leftist factions did not hold total control over their membership in the OPT. The erosion of the Left's entrenchment there during the first half of the 1990s was linked to the lack of democracy within the organisations. The leadership's imposition of its decisions concerned both the members' political line and the orientations of the associated organisations in terms of projects and activities. Consequently, such strict implementation of democratic centralism pushed an increasing number of grassroots activists to disillusionment and to abandon their organisations.[107]

The utter failure of the boycott strategy had a direct impact on the PFLP, which decided to attend the 21st session of the PNC to be held in Gaza in April 1996. This meant that the PFLP's leadership decided to return to the OPT under the provisions of the Oslo accords. Such a decision prompted harsh criticisms from the Islamist opposition, which supposedly was still in partnership with the PFLP within the APF.[108] Indeed, after refusing to provide a "nationalist cover" to the PLO leadership and Israel's plans, the PFLP allowed its members to attend a PNC session supposed to deliver what the Israeli side required during bilateral negotiations, namely the amendment of the Palestinian National Charter. Thus, Malluh's intervention during the Council to condemn "any modification of the Charter" did not sound credible, underscoring the PFLP's predicament.[109]

The development of the PFLP leadership's efforts on the institutional level showed the interconnection between the failure of its strategy and its concerns over internal power. Both these factors contributed to the shift towards increased dialogue with the PNA and acceptance of the post-Oslo status quo. In other words, within the tension between opposition and integration, these aspects tilted the balance in favour of the PFLP's quest for re-inclusion in both the old and new Palestinian institutions.

Looking for a Settlement

Starting from late 1996, the PFLP definitively reoriented its political action in order to reach a settlement with Fatah and the PNA concerning its presence in the OPT. This change in policy orientation marked the last step of the PFLP's major shift from total rejection to the acceptance of post-Oslo regime. In other words, it represented the outcome of policy fluctuation on its main level, prompted by failure of the PFLP's oppositional agenda and its need to preserve some political influence through the reorganisation of its structure in the OPT.

The PFLP displayed officially its willingness to open a new course and start a comprehensive dialogue in June 1996, with the circulation of a "political initiative to reorganise the Palestinian house". The initiative aimed at "opening the way of dialogue among all the Palestinian political forces and trends (…) and restore national unity". The logical starting point of the document was the result of the Israeli elections, in which, unexpectedly, the Likud party led by Benjamin Netanyahu defeated Shimon Peres' Labour Party, raising serious concerns within the peace camp. The PFLP claimed that in the light of the Oslo failure and the rise to power in Israel of a political force openly opposed to the peace process, a new space for the reconsideration of the "nationalist program" had emerged.[110]

In order to support the initiative politically, PFLP leaders such as Taysir Qub'a stressed their organisation's "historical commitment" to the fight against all national fragmentations and underlined how mending the division could also promote democracy and repel authoritarianism in the new Palestinian political arena.[111] The shift in PFLP discourse emerged clearly in a Central Committee statement issued in December 1996 which prioritised the need for a "field unity to confront the [Israeli] policies of settlement, Judaization and siege".[112] According to some reports, during this Central Council session the PFLP also decided to allow its members to join the lower ranks of the PNA institutions, specifically the public administration and the Civil Police. The boycott of upper posts that entailed direct contact with the Israeli counterpart remained intact; nonetheless, a line had clearly been crossed.[113]

The dialogue continued at different paces throughout 1997 and started to have its first major effects. After Abd al-Rahim Malluh's return, the PFLP started considering the relocation of other high-profile cadres to the OPT. According to the declaration released by Abu Ali Mustafa in the

wake of his return to the OPT in September 1999, the PFLP had already decided in 1996 to dispatch its Deputy Secretary-General to the territories but a last-minute Israeli refusal delayed Mustafa's return to Palestine.[114] Nevertheless, at this stage, rumours about the possible return of George Habash himself started to spread when the Secretary-General set the new PFLP focus by declaring that "the contradiction with the enemy had to be prioritised over all other contradictions" in a clear reference to divergences with the PNA. In this regard, Habash specified that the PFLP intended to settle all differences within the Palestinian camp, renewing its availability to discuss all aspects concerning the crisis of intra-Palestinian relations.[115]

The PFLP once again resorted extensively to its traditional Maoist concept of "changing contradictions" to justify its shifting line and even hardliners, notably Abu Ali Mustafa, followed suit.[116] Besides being addressed to the PFLP's own base, this discourse also aimed at responding to attacks coming from Hamas. Beyond the overall rejection of the Oslo accords and institutions, the Islamist movement disapproved the final PFLP choice to remain within the traditional framework of the Palestinian national movement. While the peace process was ostensibly delivering some of its promises in the forms of elections and direct Palestinian administration, the orientation of the PLO secular opposition did not play in favour of Hamas' claim to lead the national movement.[117] In addition to "primary and secondary contradictions", the PFLP ideologues tried to justify their stance by also invoking the PLO status of utmost national framework and achievement. By claiming its commitment to "reform and rebuilding" of the PLO, the PFLP artificially separated it from the overlapping PNA. As Malluh maintained, while great dangers to the cause still stemmed from self-administration, a common agenda was nonetheless needed to tackle those issues on which a consensus could be built, namely resistance to Israel's colonial practices on the ground such as settlement construction and political arrests.[118] Such positions underscored both the PFLP's fluctuating line as well as its inability to propose an alternative, despite the frameworks of the APF and, more significantly, the Unified Leadership still existed. As it had already emerged clearly, the dependence of the PFLP's bureaucratic apparatus on the PLO represented an insurmountable barrier to its political agency.

The PFLP's willingness to pursue dialogue with Fatah and the PNA ultimately reflected its weaker position. The PFLP wanted to reorganise its network in the OPT and to this end it needed to find a settlement with its counterparts as soon as possible. From this, stemmed the frustration when

Arafat delayed his response to the PFLP's dialogue initiative or when a given talks session failed to achieve the hoped results.[119] The Fatah-PFLP dialogue was finally upgraded in summer 1999, when a PFLP Central Committee delegation headed by Abu Ali Mustafa met with a Fatah team chaired by Arafat himself in Cairo. Shortly after, another round of talks in Amman was concluded with the issue of a joint Fatah-PFLP statement. The focus was on discussing a shared "PLO nationalist program", including activities to confront Israel's policies, and the necessary "steps towards the statehood declaration". The PFLP, for its part, stressed on the reform of PLO institutions, from trade unions to higher institutional bodies, and particularly the reactivation of the PNC, conceived as the "true Palestinian Parliament" whose members were to be directly elected by the people, whatever its location.[120] However, given the PFLP's priority of tackling its organisational problems in the OPT, the main issues at stake were the return of Abu Ali Mustafa to the Territories and the release of PFLP activists detained in PNA prisons.[121] The return of the Labour Party to power in Israel in May 1999 probably contributed to achieving the most important of these two goals, notably the return of the PFLP's Deputy-Secretary General to the OPT. After Arafat obtained the necessary approval from the Israeli authorities, Abu Ali Mustafa crossed the Allenby Bridge and arrived in Jericho on September 30, 1999, making his return to Palestine after 32 years of exile.[122]

The entrance into the territories of the next PFLP Secretary-General marked the final acceptance of the post-Oslo status quo. Although the PFLP still believed that the national movement was in a phase of national liberation, offering no real space for state-building, at the same time it wanted to "secure a political, organisational and institutional structure likely to form a strong foundation upon which to declare a Palestinian State" as Abu Ali said in an interview shortly before his return. The Deputy-Secretary went so far as to say that the PFLP might not oppose a final status agreement, if its content was to satisfy requirements concerning Palestinian sovereignty and right of return for Palestinian refugees.[123] The PFLP continued to affirm its rejection of the PNA as a direct emanation of the Oslo agreement, but the de facto settlement with the self-administration governing faction, implied that the PFLP continued to adhere to its role of loyal opposition. This ultimate shift underscored the PFLP's final prioritisation of political and institutional integration over its oppositional role, confirming the repetition of a pattern observed several times during previous phases. However, the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa

Intifada in September 2000 would show the definitive marginalisation that the PFLP now experienced. The opposition-integration dilemma continued to determine the PFLP's agency and policy fluctuation occurred with even more clarity as the new uprising unleashed a further reconfiguration of Palestinian political balances.

Conclusions

Throughout the 1990s, while old contradictions continued to afflict the PFLP's agency, newly emerged sources of tensions crystallised. This set the stage for the ultimate marginalisation of the PFLP within the fast-changing balances of the Palestinian national movement. During the decade, the PFLP's conduct fluctuated on a macro-level, shifting from total rejection of the Oslo accords to de facto acceptance of the new political scenario. At the same time, the PFLP acted inconsistently on a micro-level, namely on all those issues that successively emerged as urgent. The global and regional events that involved the Palestinian national movement in the early 1990s had major repercussions on the PFLP, emphasising its opposition-integration dilemma. The cut of Gulf funds following the PLO support for Iraq and the USSR's demise strengthened the PFLP's political and economic dependence from the PLO platform. Consequently, PLO institutions remained the main framework of the PFLP's action, notwithstanding the unprecedented development that the Oslo accords entailed.

The PFLP's dependence from the PLO was one of the main factors that prevented genuine ideological and organisational reform during the 1993 Fifth National Congress. Years of PLO state-like functioning and the urgency of ensuring survival before and after 1982 deprived the PFLP of all strategic planning abilities. As a result, the conclusions of the National Congress reflected a conservative approach, as the confirmation of Marxist-Leninist principles responded to the PFLP leadership's need to maintain control over the organisation.

Lacking the appropriate tools to face the challenges of the post-Cold War era, the PFLP saw its fundamental opposition-integration dilemma exacerbate following the Oslo accords and the establishment of the PNA. Divided between its adherence to the PLO framework and the opposition to an unacceptable settlement, the PFLP tried to forge an institutional opposition with irreconcilable partners and remained disconnected from grassroot mobilisation. In this context, the rationale of the PFLP-DFLP Unified Leadership, as well as of the attempted APF with

Islamist forces, was to delegitimise Arafat's line within Palestinian institutions. While in contrast with the PFLP's own rhetoric calling for grassroots mobilisation against the Oslo accords, the focus on PLO institutional politics also reflected the outside leadership's will to prevent inside cadres from gaining prominence. The exiled leadership remained deaf to increasing calls from the OPT calling for opposition from within the PNA. More importantly, the PFLP failed to realise that as factional ties loosened, leftist sympathisers were willing to participate and possibly influence the institution-building process. The wide turnout of the 1996 first PNA general election demonstrated the unviability of the PFLP's institutional opposition as the Unified Leadership's call for boycott went largely unheard and the Palestinian Left proved its distance from the grassroot national movement. While the Islamist opposition strengthened its ground presence and claimed the role of radical opposition, the Left strategy amounted to actual inaction. Moreover, its policies appeared further discredited as following the failed boycott, leftist concerns for unity started to recede and both the PFLP and the DFLP sought to reintegrate individually the mainstream national movement, especially by arranging the return of their leaders to the OPT. Factional reintegration however, while disavowing the alleged commitment to resistance "on the ground", also diminished leftist weight within Palestinian institutions, contradicting the PFLP's long-term goal of changing the internal balances of power.

The PFLP, and generally leftist, loyal opposition also prevented effective coordination with the Islamist factions, especially Hamas. The Islamists' refusal to recognise the primacy of the PLO was a greater obstacle to collaboration with the PLO Left than ideological differences. While this factor contributed to push the PFLP and the DFLP back to dialogue with Fatah, such major shift, in light of the Oslo accords also fostered the perceived absence of any real alternative within the PLO.

As the 1990s neared their end, the assertion of post-Oslo politics paved the way for a growing polarisation of Palestinian politics. The PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma not only determined an uncertain political line throughout an era of major changes. While the Palestinian national movement was now divided between a non-PLO opposition and a PLO mainstream, the PFLP's loyal opposition appeared void of all political meaning and functions. Unable to overcome its dilemmas, the PFLP was bound to full marginalisation in the historical phase that saw the shortcomings of the peace process come to the fore through the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

Notes

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CHAPTER 6

The Al-Aqsa Intifada and After: Resurfacing Contradictions and Ultimate Marginalisation

Introduction

The failure to delegitimise the Oslo peace process and the institutions it established led the PFLP to deal with the PNA and the Oslo political regime as an enduring reality. Starting from the second half of the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, the PFLP sought integration into the new political regime, while trying to reformulate the bases for its opposition to the PLO and PNA leadership. Consequently, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to affect the PFLP's agency and to reproduce policy fluctuation. Moreover, as Palestinian politics became increasingly polarised around the Hamas-Fatah competition, the PFLP's "loyal opposition" started to appear as de facto alignment with the Oslo political regime.

As the PFLP strived to find its role in the post-Oslo national movement "democratisation", "consensus" and "mediation" seemed to be its main operative words. The PFLP insisted on democratising the OPT political space and keeping the PNA authoritarian practices in check. Calls for the reactivation and expansion of the PLO to the Islamist camp would be launched throughout the late 1990s, the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the post-Arafat transition. Leftist activist joined new Palestinian NGOs established on Oslo-derived western funding, hoping to find a substitute to party politics and a counterbalance to the PNA. As the violence of the second Palestinian mass uprising raged on, the PFLP invoked a new "consensus" within the national movement. The actual primacy of the PNA over the PLO conferred little credibility to talks of reactivating the historical

F. S. Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4339-5_6

Palestinian platform, while Hamas showed no real interest in joining it. Soon, the idea that civil society might salvage leftist activism displayed its limits and the negative fallout of association with the professionalised, depoliticised framework of western-funded NGOs undermined the Left's popularity.

Conversely, to what the PFLP auspicated, the Al-Aqsa Intifada did not provide the bases for a new Palestinian consensus rejecting a failing peace process. Instead the uprising became the stage of a bitter, militarised intra-Palestinian competition, paving the way to Hamas-Fatah polarisation. In the attempt to follow up its call for a new shared political base, the PFLP formulated several initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue. However, these initiatives would rather reflect the distance between Hamas' focus on armed struggle and the PNA's political calculations. Furthermore, while calling for coordinated action, the PFLP remained trapped in the retaliatory, individual pattern that dominated Palestinian military activity dictated by Hamas and Fatah attempt to outbid each other. Marginalised in this competition, the PFLP would also suffer the harsh Israeli repression that killed Abu Ali Mustafa and arrested his successor, Ahmad Sa'adat.

After Arafat's death in November 2004 and the end of the uprising in February 2005, the PFLP continued to aim at integration in a transitioning Palestinian polity. In this phase, policy fluctuation did not leave the PFLP's course of action, particularly against the background of Hamas and Fatah power struggle. Again, the dependence from the PLO/PNA framework led the PFLP to shift from support to Hamas, to alignment with Fatah as the two factions headed towards military showdown. This shift signalled the PFLP's inability to disengage from the traditional Palestinian political framework. In the deeply divided, and increasingly discredited, Palestinian national movement, this inability compromised all chances to see a PFLP-led "third way" emerge, thus condemning the Front to definitive marginalisation.

Integrating the PNA: Democratisation and Commitment to Civil Society

After Abu Ali Mustafa's return to the OPT in late 1999 and the de facto acceptance of the post-Oslo political scenario, the PFLP had to come to terms with the inconsistencies that such a step entailed. In fact, such inconsistencies emerged as soon as the high-profile dialogue between the

PFLP and Fatah started in early 1999. The main issue that the contacts with Fatah had raised was a possible PFLP acceptance of the PNA's legitimacy and a potential interest in joining its institutions.[1] Hence, as the PFLP continued to stress its opposition to Oslo, it now had to reformulate the bases of its oppositional role. In the attempt to fulfil this task, the PFLP thus had to resolve the contradiction stemming from acknowledging the PNA while opposing its founding principles and agenda. This position mirrored to some extent that which the PFLP maintained towards the PLO in previous phases and reflected its unwillingness to disengage from participation in Palestinian institutions.

In this context, the PFLP's official narrative focused on democratising the Palestinian political arena in the OPT and the PNA's practices. Such focus on democratisation aimed at capitalising on the discontent provoked by widespread corruption within the PNA's bureaucracy as well as by the authoritarian practices of its security services. As the PNA settled in the OPT, Arafat employed the nascent public sector to reconstruct his patronage network. His absolute control of state-like bureaucracy enabled the PNA President to keep control on PLO returnees, local activists and notables alike through their inclusion or exclusion from the public service.[2] This, in turn, fostered corruption and rent seeking behaviour all through the echelons of the PNA's public sector, which ensured loyalty to the Palestinian political leadership.[3] The PNA leadership also enforced its rule on the OPT by relying on multiple security services which were created both to respect the security requirements envisaged in the Oslo accords and to incorporate the returnee and local PLO military personnel. Consequently, policing the Palestinian population and repressing opposition to the PNA state-building project quickly became a paramount priority for the Palestinian self-government.[4]

Many leftist activists, therefore, saw a chance to counter the PNA's corruption and authoritarianism by empowering Palestinian civil society, and in particular its main actors, namely the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The effort to democratise the Oslo-derived Palestinian polity thus equated to building a counterweight to the PNA's leadership. Civil society and NGOs apparently provided a suitable space to achieve this goal.[5] Nevertheless, as the NGOs became increasingly embedded into the post-Oslo economic and political regime, their development contributed to the state-building process, ultimately bolstering the legitimacy of the PNA that represented the core of such a process. The NGOs' recourse to the legislative and judiciary bodies would reinforce the PNA's state

functions without ultimately succeeding in embodying an effective counterbalance to it.[6]

In this new phase, the PFLP tried to counter the PNA's "state-building" narrative by stressing on the overarching task of national liberation. As the PLO Executive Council member Abd al-Rahim Malluh clarified, the PFLP needed to challenge Fatah and the PNA's public discourse presenting the current phase as one of coexistence with Israel, in which nationalist commitment is equated to contributing to the state-building effort. Despite the implementation of the Oslo accords and the establishment of a self-governing authority, the core of the Palestinian issue remained unresolved. The Palestinian national movement was still going through a phase of national liberation, but its political forces had to renew the understanding of this concept. In Malluh's words, this entailed rebuilding the "Palestinian people's national institutions", first and foremost the PLO. Interestingly, the PNA figured too, and its "democratic reconstruction" could "provide a solid base for Palestinian unity".[7] Thus, the issue democratising the OPT political space started to acquire centrality in the PFLP's view. As Abu Ali Mustafa also pointed out the existence of the PNA, and of its political and institutional by-products, was a matter of fact. Its corruption, its lack of sovereignty, its autocratic practices mirroring those of Arab regimes, however, harmed political mobilisation against the occupation. Democratising Palestinian society then was fundamental to re-establish a national authority capable of waging the battle for an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and ensuring the right of return for Palestinian refugees.[8] The discourse around democratisation signalled the PFLP's tacit readiness to participate in the state-building process. The PFLP did not intend to take part directly in the endeavour by joining the PNA government. Nonetheless, the stress on the importance of local elections, supposedly planned for late 2000, underscored the changed assessment towards the new Palestinian polity.[9]

The PFLP's discourse around democratisation and modification of the PNA's functions echoed that of the NGO community. The Palestinian NGOs active in the OPT at the beginning of the 1990s originated from the factional organisations, such as trade unions and women associations, that had developed throughout the previous fifteen years. Towards the end of the First Intifada, the PLO-affiliated associations started to experience a transformation in terms of structure, goals and underpinning ethos that gradually turned the mass-based movements into professional NGOs. As Jordan cut its administrative and economic ties with the OPT in 1988

and the 1991 Gulf war stopped the influx of Arab funds, the Palestinian civil society organisations started turning to Western donors to gain the necessary finances. European and American money, however, came with new requirements such as a focus on human rights and development, project-based intervention and notably a "non-partisan approach". This entailed that the organisations should focus on service provision and stop mobilising the population as they did during the 1980s. As a result, NGOs became professional, not political, entities thus gradually losing their direct contact with popular classes.[10] Nonetheless, as the PNA installed itself in the OPT, the NGOs, and the civil society they represented, appeared as one of the few spaces acting autonomously from the new ruling entity. The NGOs' economic independence started to attract many opposition figures despite their elitist and liberal profile. The NGOs' ability to preserve independent sources of income and the presence in its management boards of several leftist opponents fuelled a confrontation with the PNA, giving the perception that civil society was really the new bulwark of the national movement.[11] The apparent transformation of the NGOs into an effective oppositional body reached a high point with the formation of the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) between 1993 and 1994.

Palestinian NGOs formed an effective lobbying group that included the largest organisations and was led by secular and leftist activists issued mainly from the PPP and the PFLP.[12] After its formation, the PNGO clashed with the PNA over new legislation regulating NGO status and activities. Between 1995 and 2000, the PNGO conducted a hard lobbying campaign aimed at the newly established PLC as well as at foreign donors. In doing so, it managed to secure the necessary support to oppose the PNA-sponsored draft law that entailed government licensing and control over the NGOs. After a five-year battle fought on local and international media and within the PNA's legislative, executive and judiciary institutions, the PNGO had its own draft law approved by the PLC. Nonetheless the PNA ultimately managed to assert state control over the NGOs, thanks to the registration and reporting requirements foreseen in the law.[13]

The conclusion of the conflict over the NGO law essentially marked the end of the debate about their potential transformation into full-fledged oppositional social movements. At this point it was clear that the NGOs benefitted significantly from the expertise of leftist activists, in particular in establishing their own lobbying group. Conversely, the traditional leftist factions did not draw tangible advantages from this relationship which in

turn evidenced their crisis.[14] The leftist factions experienced a significant shrinkage in their party membership, as even Abu Ali Mustafa acknowledged,[15] and saw a steady flow of middle cadres heading towards the NGOs. These activists were looking for new possibilities to renew their commitment in the post-Oslo scenario, and apparently the NGOs were the only institutions providing such framework. Moreover, as the leftist factions were no longer able to maintain their social infrastructure, due to economic and organisational crises, the NGOs emerged as the best employment option for experienced activists.[16] The diminution of active members, coupled with the inability to attract mass support, further exacerbated the leftist factions' problems of internal renewal.

In addition, as the NGOs and the broader civil society failed to engender an effective surrogate for opposition parties, the leftist factions were left dealing only with the negative effects of the NGOs' professionalisation. The new western-funded projects favoured a depoliticised approach on issues such as economic development, women's empowerment and human rights that appeared divorced from the OPT reality on the ground. Forced to respect the donors' requirement of supporting the state-building effort as conceived by the peace process, the NGOs' projects could no longer contextualise development into the framework of the ongoing occupation and Israel's colonial practices nor formulate a narrative placed within the context of national liberation. Consequently, there was no space left for any action aiming at fostering the target groups' political consciousness, as was the case before the Oslo era. The NGOs shifted their focus towards service provision, thus looking at their target groups as mere recipients of their activities rather than active stakeholders.[17] This depoliticising trend was further strengthened as lucrative jobs in the NGOs attracted increasing numbers of young professionals hailing from the urban elites. The influx of these professionals widened the gap with the popular masses and exacerbated the NGOs' elitist profile.[18] As leftist activists and secular professionals became more and more embroiled in the NGO sector, while the leftist factions were still pondering on how to renew their political agency, the vacuum they left in the field of popular mobilisation was quickly filled by Islamist factions. Hamas-linked organisations, for instance, independent from the professional scheme that international donors imposed on secular NGOs, managed to spread their own militant approach and to increase their popularity among the Palestinian population.[19]

Ultimately, the Palestinian leftist activists' refuge in civil society ended up strengthening the solidification of the negative economic and political consequences of the Oslo accords, such as the dependence of Palestinian society on foreign funding and the depoliticisation of civil society movements. This had a double negative fallout on the leftist factions as they appeared increasingly compromised by association with the Oslo regime they claimed to oppose. In addition, the development that the NGO sector underwent reinforced the status of the Islamist forces, further discrediting leftist opposition.

The PFLP's Sixth National Congress: The Resurfacing Contradictions of "Institutional" Opposition

The new round of the National Congress articulated the PFLP's attempts to frame its new role of opposition to the PNA within the post-Oslo political regime. The PFLP's rhetoric highlighted the role that a reactivated PLO could play in providing a forum for democratic debate, thus opening up the possibility of adopting a different Palestinian confrontational and negotiating line. Nonetheless, the PFLP's discourse on PLO reform clashed with the actual functioning of the Palestinian umbrella organisation and its role since the Oslo accords. This underscored the contradictions within the PFLP's narrative which aimed at arguing the viability of an "institutional" opposition. Moreover, the results of the congress reflected more the PFLP's interest in integrating Palestinian institutions than its resolve to embody an opposition "from within". Ultimately, far from delineating a clear line, the Sixth National Congress' main implication was Abu Ali Mustafa's succession to George Habash as head of the PFLP.

The PFLP trope, according to which the national movement was still facing a phase of national liberation, was meant to oppose PNA discourse in support of the peace process. Nonetheless, the PFLP could invoke this argument also to justify its desire to maintain contact with Fatah and the PNA. Indeed, in the context of a struggle for national liberation, the PFLP could still identify in the clash with Israel the primary contradiction that the national movement had to tackle. This allowed the PFLP to consider the achievement of national unity, based on a "common denominator program", a strategic goal.[20] However, in the light of the past failure to

effectively delegitimise the Oslo accords, this position reflected the PFLP's need to come to terms with the PNA. Furthermore, as the September 2000 deadline for final-status negotiations between Israel and the PLO approached, the PFLP's favour towards dialogue with the PNA appeared as a hint to its intention to have some role in it. The PFLP could not directly participate in negotiations but Abu Ali Mustafa did not exclude the possibility of accepting the political order emerging from potentially successful final-status talks.[21] Concerning negotiations, the PFLP essentially called for a re-inclusion of United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions, number 194 in particular which sanctioned right of return for Palestinian refugees, into the peace process after the Oslo accords had de facto excluded them. The underpinning principle was lending true sovereignty to the PNA and that required going beyond Oslo's narrow terms.[22]

The PFLP's interest in keeping at least one foot in the framework of political settlement was also reflected in its suspension of armed operations against the occupation over the second half of the 1990s. In addition, even its official line stated that each resistance method had to be "employed according to the specificities of each phase", which is a clear reference to its halt of military activities.[23] The PFLP's focus on institutional politics was also evident in its stress on reviving the role of the PLO. According to the PFLP, the PLO still represented the ground upon which Palestinian unity should be established, as well as the space to fight "Oslo legitimacy".[24] While this analysis had a theoretical logic, the reality of PLO dysfunction underscored the PFLP's inability to formulate an alternative to traditional PLO politics as well as its economic dependence on it. After the Oslo accords, Arafat essentially paralysed the PLO institutions: the PNC, for instance, convened one last time in 1996 only to meet Israeli requirements for the progress of the peace process.[25] Consequent upon active PLO disempowerment, popular disaffection towards it grew steadily both in the diaspora and particularly in the OPT.[26] Notwithstanding the changed circumstances, the PFLP was unable to resolve the contradiction stemming from its relationship with the PLO. The PLO provided a theoretical framework in which the PFLP's discourse over the priorities of the new phase, such as emphasising the contradiction with Israel to achieve Palestinian unity, was still viable. Nonetheless, as the PNA de facto replaced the PLO, the PFLP's adherence to it continued to undermine its claimed oppositional role.

Besides discussing the new PFLP political line, the National Congress also had to formalise George Habash's resignation from his post of

Secretary-General, an intention that Al-Hakim had already made public in April that year.[27] Cleary, Abu Ali Mustafa was to fill the vacant position in the first, regular turnover at the head of a Palestinian faction. The succession was smooth as Habash's resignation was long expected considering his health conditions. If his capabilities had already been limited following a stroke in 1980, twenty years later he reportedly was no longer able to work more than four hours a day.[28] In his speech addressing the Congress, Habash denied that his renouncement was related to his health in order to avoid casting doubts on his leadership throughout his last years in command. According to the official version, his resignation was to be an example to encourage renewal within the organisation, particularly in a phase when change at the head of the organisation was supposedly a priority.[29] As Habash resigned, some rumours ascribed this decision to dissent with Abu Ali Mustafa over the PFLP's future line. Although the two leaders might have held disagreeing views, it is not clear on what issues they clashed. According to different sources, Habash did not support dialogue with Fatah which started in 1999 and supported a renewal of armed struggle in the OPT, possibly in order to hamper the PNA's state-building effort.[30] Probably, disagreement occurred over the degree of recognition that the PFLP had to lend to the PNA, nonetheless this does not seem sufficient to motivate a resignation. Indeed, one of the main reasons that pushed Abu Ali to resettle in the OPT was the need to reorganise the PFLP's network, military branch included.[31] The new Secretary-General's desire to keep the military option ready ultimately found hard evidence in the operations that the PFLP launched during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, most notably the assassination of the Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze'evi in October 2001. On the eve of the second Intifada, armed struggle had been paused but certainly not discarded.

Ultimately, the new round of the National Congress did not bring much clarity to the PFLP's political line. Rather, it reflected the predicament that the faction was experiencing in formulating a viable "institutional" opposition to the PNA's leadership. Indeed, as the PLO institutions appeared weakened and subject to PNA control, while an inclusion of Palestinian Islamist forces was not in sight, the PFLP's propositions had little likelihood of being implemented. Rather, the unviability of the PFLP's line underscored its willingness to delineate a theoretical framework that would justify the pursuit of dialogue with the PNA and PLO leadership. The PFLP narrative on its political priorities was telling of its interest in participating in the post-Oslo political regime. It also

delineated an unclear positioning within the national movement that contributed to the PFLP's fluctuation. The unresolved dilemma of the PFLP's "institutional" opposition was reflected in its new Secretary-General's decision to pursue contacts with the PNA and PLO leadership while overseeing military reorganisation in the OPT.

The Outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada

The second Palestinian mass uprising was a military insurgency in which Palestinian factions acted with little coordination and mainly in competition with one another. The immediate, harsh Israeli response fuelled the militarisation process and, as a consequence, popular organisations gave way to the armed branches of the Palestinian factions. The peculiarities of the Al-Aqsa Intifada affected the PFLP's agency greatly, contributing to its policy fluctuation.

As happened with the first mass uprising against the occupation in 1987, more than a decade later, a catalytic event set fire to long-standing popular discontent. On 28 September 2000, the Likud leader Ariel Sharon embarked on a provocative walk on al-Haram al-Sharif to assert the right of all Israelis to visit the Temple Mount. Widespread popular demonstrations exploded throughout the whole OPT shortly after Sharon's tour, in protest against what Palestinians saw as the Likud leader's intention to display Israeli sovereignty over al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount area since 1967.[32]

However, the underlying factors that led to the so-called Al-Aqsa Intifada took root in almost a decade-long deceitful peace process. Since the 1991 Madrid conference and after the establishment of the PNA in 1994, the Israeli authorities retained full and tight control over the West Bank and Gaza. As the five-year transitory period preceding final-status talks expired, the Israeli army did not complete the series of three gradual redeployments meant to end its presence in the OPT. Meanwhile, settlement activity continued unabated, contributing to the fragmentation of Palestinian territory through the construction and expansion of settlements on Palestinian soil and the creation of an infrastructure network reserved for the settler population. As a consequence, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank remained essentially separated, the eastern part of Jerusalem, supposed to be the capital of the future Palestinian state, was sealed off from the rest of the West Bank, and this latter territory was de facto divided into a northern and a southern canton. The whole structure of Israel's

occupation remained in place and some of its practices, such as the closure of specific areas as a measure of collective punishment, were routinised. In fact, the Oslo peace process allowed the production of new Israeli "facts on the ground" as well as new repressive practices that made a functioning Palestinian state on the OPT essentially unviable.[33]

The overlapping PLO/PNA leadership, both as a negotiating party and as governing entity, thus appeared unable to deliver the expected goals of the peace process, first and foremost a relatively quick end to the occupation. The uninterrupted Israeli colonisation of Palestinian land and the PNA's lack of sovereignty compromised popular confidence in the state-building process. Symbolic of a renewed colonial relationship was the cooperation between the numerous Palestinian security services and Israel's internal intelligence agency, Shin Bet. As Israel retained full control on the ground, the PNA's attempts to advance its state-building process in the economic, social and political fields required the consensus of the occupation authorities. Such consensus was in turn bound to the PNA's effectiveness in policing the Palestinian population on behalf of the Israeli authorities.[34] Against this background, as some polls run after the first mass protests showed, a majority of the OPT Palestinian population now opposed the Oslo peace process while a vast majority supported the resumption of armed struggle as a resistance tool.[35]

Under these circumstances, US President Bill Clinton decided to proceed with the supervision of final-status talks, extending his official invitation to the Israeli and Palestinian delegations. According to the Oslo accords, final-status negotiations were to deliver a settlement to core Israeli-Palestinian conflict issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees' right of return or control over OPT borders and natural resources. The supposed outcome of such talks was the official end of the conflict and the proclamation of a Palestinian State alongside Israel.[36] However, Israeli "facts on the ground", while compromising the PNA's viability, also undermined the success of final-status talks. Furthermore, at Camp David the Israeli settlement proposal presented to the PLO delegation had a far more limited scope than what envisaged in the Oslo accords. For instance, the proposal did not contemplate full Palestinian sovereignty over east Jerusalem and asked for the end of any claim related to the refugees' right of return in exchange for the repatriation of a few thousand Palestinian exiles.[37] Accepting such clauses would have meant crossing those "red lines" upon which the remainder of the PNA's legitimacy depended. Finally, the Camp David talks collapsed, marking the de facto

end of the peace process conceived in Oslo and Cairo. Shortly after, Ariel Sharon decided to visit al-Haram al-Sharif, with the consent of the Labour-led government, thus triggering an uprising that the Camp David negotiations had significantly contributed to fuel.[38]

A Divided Movement in an Asymmetric War

The main difference between the First and the Second Intifadas lay in the militarisation that rapidly turned the initial non-violent marches and demonstrations into armed clashes fought on the frontline of Israeli checkpoints and settlements. Unlike the 1987 uprising, Palestinian civil society was completely absent from the scene in what appeared to be a direct result of the Oslo-led disempowerment of grassroots organisations in the OPT.[39] The "professionalised" NGOs focused on advocacy actions such as documenting the number of Palestinian fatalities, arrests, Israel's violations of human rights, and so on. However, such focus on advocacy prevented them from playing a role in fostering non-violent resistance and other methods of political mobilisation. Moreover, dependence on foreign funding entailed a dissociation from any formal cooperation with the Palestinian factions that ranged from the lack of support to political initiative to the adoption of critical positions towards the resumption of armed struggle.[40]

The militarisation was a result of the Israeli recourse to disproportionate force to curb the initial unarmed demonstrations. Palestinian armed operations increased, reaching a pace of 30–40 attacks daily between October and November 2000.[41] Moreover, at the end of October, Islamic Jihad carried out the first suicide bombing of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Between November and December 2001, the Israeli army started to hit Fatah and PNA forces, such as Force 17, Arafat's presidential guard. Alongside regular counterinsurgency operations came the first targeted assassination of Palestinian leaders, a tactic to which Israel resorted regularly throughout its history but that intensified during the Al-Aqsa Intifada. As a result, Israel killed 339 Palestinians, of whom 210 were the actual targets, in this kind of operations between 2000 and 2006. The reasons and goals pushing Israel to increase targeted killing were manifold, ranging from pressuring Palestinian leaders to stop attacks, weakening the armed organisations' military commands, to eliminating "unwanted" Palestinian leaders and derailing negotiation initiatives.[42]

At the forefront of the Palestinian military response to the Israeli crackdown was Fatah "*tanzim*",[43] a label that loosely referred to the network of Fatah cadres and leaders in the OPT. Far from being a fully structured group, the *tanzim* originated from the "inside" leadership which had emerged during the first Intifada and that was largely incorporated into the PNA's ministries and security forces after the Oslo accords. Although the *tanzim* declared its support for the peace process and the PNA's state-building process, it embodied the voice of opposition within the ruling party. As such, its leaders often spoke against corruption within the PNA and called for democratic reform. Probably the most prominent among these cadres was Marwan Barghouti, Fatah's West Bank Secretary. Their main goals were shifting the balance of decision-making from the returnee leadership to the "inside" cadres as well as preserving Fatah's status of nationalist movement, acting as autonomously as possible from the PNA.[44] Such autonomy was nonetheless to be useful for Arafat himself after the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The PNA President could not take direct lead of the Intifada, notably in the light of PNA-Israel security cooperation. However, he could neither order his forces to quell the uprising in a move that entailed igniting popular revolt against the PNA. Consequently, Arafat allowed the *tanzim* to regroup local militias into the Fatah-linked Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (AMB). Moreover, the *tanzim* also oversaw the formation of the National and Islamic Higher Committee for the Follow-Up of the Intifada (NIHC), a loose umbrella meant to gather all the factions of the national movement but that fell short of being equivalent to the First Intifada's Unified National Leadership. Arafat hoped that military pressure and the international repercussions of the uprising might provide some diplomatic gain vis-à-vis Israel. However, the *tanzim* soon decided to mount systematic attacks on settlements and checkpoints in order to raise the cost of occupation.[45] The involvement of the *tanzim* and Arafat's attempt to impose a kind of "remote control" over the uprising underscored the lack of a centralised leadership directing the efforts of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. In contrast with the 1987 Intifada, the second uprising appeared as a heavily militarised enterprise, devoid of a structured leadership and a wide mass involvement.

At the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada the *tanzim* and Fatah were clearly driving the Palestinian initiative while the PLO opposition factions, particularly the PFLP, contributed to the military effort in order to foster the renewed resistance ethos. In this initial phase, a gap between Hamas and Fatah emerged as the latter movement took the lead of the Palestinian

military response. This was mainly a result of Fatah's opportunity to exploit the military and logistical infrastructure developed during the Oslo interim phase. Thanks to the military assistance received since the Oslo accords, both Fatah's own forces and the PNA's apparatus were better manned and armed than Hamas. Although initially the *tanzim* did not rely extensively on the PNA's military capabilities, this situation changed with the formation of the AMB. For its part Hamas did not exclude political and military cooperation with the *tanzim* under the umbrella of the NIHC; nonetheless, competition among the two major forces could not be avoided in the long term. The high level of violence that characterised the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the harsh Israeli repression thus provided Hamas with the appropriate background to resume suicide bombings in March 2001. Besides inflicting heavy losses on the enemy, this tactic allowed Hamas to match Fatah both in terms of popularity and military initiative while contrasting Arafat's attempt to score diplomatic points, thanks to the Intifada.[46]

In summary, the transformation of the Palestinian uprising into a military insurgency and the competition among Palestinian factions, in particular between Hamas and Fatah, emerged quickly as the main features of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Nonetheless, in its first phases, the PFLP saw it as an opportunity for a rearrangement of the Palestinian national movement based on greater consensus and coordination on both the military and political level.

The PFLP's View of the Al-Aqsa Intifada: From a New National Front to a Bipolar System

As public demonstrations and confrontations between Palestinians and the Israeli army swept quickly across the OPT following Sharon's visit to al-Haram al-Sharif, the PFLP welcomed the outbreak of the new Al-Aqsa Intifada. In the words of Maher al-Taher, the PFLP's responsible for "external affairs", the uprising represented a "major landmark" to draw some "historical lessons". For the PFLP's leader, the most important of these lessons was that the Oslo peace process was facing a definitive deadlock, as the Intifada expressed popular rejection of a political settlement that brought the Palestinian population worse living conditions, flawed institutions and no end to the occupation.[47] Three months into the Intifada, Abu Ali Mustafa, provided his own analysis of the new political

situation, delineating what would roughly remain the PFLP's political line throughout the uprising. According to the Secretary-General, the militarisation of the Intifada underscored the persistent conflictual nature of the Palestinian cause, disavowing all those in the United States, Israel and Palestine who believed that negotiations would be the only arena for Palestinian-Israeli confrontation. The new circumstances called the Palestinian national movement to unify and restore the strategic scope of its action. In practical terms this meant supporting resistance activities and demanding the implementation of "international resolutions" on Palestine that were de facto discarded in the Oslo accords.[48] Displaying a certain political realism, the PFLP supported throughout the Al-Aqsa Intifada the unification of Palestinian efforts and the end of American tutelage in the negotiating process.

However, if finding a common denominator first among opposition factions, subsequently with Fatah, proved impossible during the Oslo years, this task appeared extremely challenging even in the light of the new Intifada. After the initial limited ground coordination under the NIHC umbrella, the PFLP was faced with the problem of surviving politically the harsh competition among the three main political groupings which emerged in the context of the Intifada: Hamas, leading the radical resistance camp, the *tanzim*/Fatah middle leadership trying to assert itself within the organisation, and the Fatah/PNA old guard who, tainted with the Oslo peace process, attempted to exploit the Intifada to salvage the negotiating process.[49] The political reconfiguration caused by the Intifada left limited political space to the PFLP and evidenced a military gap that was difficult to fill despite some major operations accomplished between 2001 and 2005. As Hamas and the Fatah/PNA camp emerged as the main competing poles within the national movement, the PFLP started to mediate between the former's hard line and the latter's diplomatic priorities. The goal was embodying an effective liaison, thus asserting a functional and useful position within Palestinian politics. Further complicating the PFLP's position, the Israeli arrest and assassination campaigns hit the Front very hard, particularly considering its smaller size compared to other factions. The Al-Aqsa Intifada thus represented yet another cornerstone of the PFLP's weakening process, further limiting its political options.

Joining the Fight: The PFLP Between Militarisation and Palestinian Fragmentation

The Al-Aqsa Intifada rapidly acquired the features of a full-fledged asymmetrical war. Nonetheless, despite the broad support that armed struggle enjoyed among the Palestinian factions, such consensus did not translate into an effective political coordination and intra-factional competition gained prominence. In this context, the PFLP's ideas on the reconfiguration of the Palestinian national movement found little margin for realisation.

The PFLP did not judge the rapid militarisation of the Al-Aqsa Intifada negatively, although this prevented large popular participation. Notwithstanding the violence unleashed in the new uprising and the sharp difference with the 1987 Intifada, the PFLP believed that the return to armed struggle was a sign of the new phase that required military action, alongside other means, to redress the unbalanced confrontation with Israel.[50] Moreover, the Fatah middle cadres and PNA security officers' leading role in the military initiative, as well as the formation of the cross factional Popular Committees, let the PFLP hope that a critical mass within Fatah was now in favour of relinquishing the failing Oslo peace process. All levels and branches of the PNA's security apparatus participated to some extent in the military effort by providing fighting forces, logistic and organisational support or funding.[51] In this context, the PFLP joined the AMB in launching armed operations against targets both within and beyond the green line. Although the AMB had a much greater capability to mount military operations, the PFLP's action demonstrated that the reorganisation of the military network supervised by Abu Ali had been effective. As of April 2001, the PFLP claimed that its "military branch, the Forces of Popular Resistance (FPR), accomplished more than 140 operations", ranging from ambushes at military outposts to mortar shelling and car bombs. The PFLP underlined how a significant part of these operations had been carried out jointly with the AMB.[52] While this number appears to be an exaggeration that probably included unplanned operations led by unaffiliated individuals and groups, nonetheless the PFLP was behind five car bombs between February and July 2001 demonstrating the FPR's ability to hit all over historic Palestine, from settlements in the West Bank to West Jerusalem and the outskirts of Tel Aviv.[53]

However, the military escalation of the Intifada was not paralleled by tangible political developments concerning the formation of a unified

leadership. The PFLP criticised the PNA for not signalling clearly its support to the "new phase of the struggle" by cutting all contacts with Israel and the United States. Throughout the first half of 2001, the PFLP continuously invited the PNA to "exploit" the positive "factors" which had emerged during the Intifada to overcome the Oslo framework and bring back United Nations (UN) resolutions to the negotiating table, thus correcting the clear unbalance stemming from the 1993 accords. The on-the-ground coordination and the wide popular demonstrations of solidarity with the Intifada happening all over the Arab world represented, in the PFLP's view, a potential support base to advance new diplomatic demands. Nevertheless, the PNA's hesitations risked jeopardising these initial achievements brought about by the Al-Aqsa Intifada.[54]

By May 2001, some main negative trends clearly emerged in the evolution of the uprising, first and foremost competition among the Palestinian factions. The Islamist factions, and particularly Hamas, launched their full-scale suicide bombing campaigns against both military and civilian targets. As pointed out earlier, the reason sparking the resumption of Hamas suicide bombings was the necessity to match AMB/Fatah military superiority. Furthermore, as Israeli responses increasingly involved targeted assassinations of factional activists and cadres, retaliatory operations started to dominate Palestinian military operations. This was particularly evident concerning Hamas and Islamic Jihad which suffered the highest toll of the Israeli assassination campaign and employed suicide bombers to systematically retaliate for their losses.[55] The PFLP saw a detrimental "individualistic" turn in both the predominance of retaliatory actions on the military level and the PNA leadership's "bureaucratic" adherence to the Oslo framework on the political one. Such potentially dangerous developments could only be tackled by giving a strategic scope to the agency of the national movement. For the PFLP, the most urgent step to achieve this goal was forming a national unity and emergency government capable of overseeing the planning of resistance activities while addressing "internal contradictions" that might lead to intra-Palestinian conflict.

In a further display of pragmatism, the PFLP identified in the call for "international temporary protection" in the OPT, the first measure that the PNA should undertake to capitalise effectively on the uprising.[56] In line with this goal, the PFLP's cadres tried to move on the regional level especially because substantial Arab support for the Intifada still failed to materialise. Abd al-Rahim Malluh, acting as a NIHC representative, demanded Arab parties during their Third General Congress to lobby

both their own governments as well as other countries in favour of exerting more diplomatic pressure on Israel.[57]

However, the PFLP did not have the means to influence the Palestinian national movement in that direction. Relegated to the virtually inactive PLO institutions, the PFLP had no minimum leverage on the PNA. The same was true for the NIHC, dominated by Hamas and Fatah's *tanzim*/AMB and unable to go beyond coordination in single military operations and joint political slogans. As the Al-Aqsa Intifada progressed, factional agendas acquired more importance whereas the uprising was either paying back or harming single factions in terms of popularity. Polls on the popularity of the Palestinian factions run throughout the Intifada hinted at a sharp increase for Hamas, which fared better than Fatah, and a clear decline for leftist factions.[58] Moreover, as the scale of violence continued to mount, the PFLP got trapped in those negative dynamics it denounced, especially at the on-the-ground, military level. The Israeli targeted assassination of Abu Ali Mustafa, on 27 August 2001, further pushed the PFLP towards the global Palestinian military trend of single faction, retaliatory armed operations.[59] Israel's assassination campaign dealt a hard blow to the PFLP, but also highlighted Abu Ali Mustafa's prominence as national leader while reflecting the PFLP's marginalisation as a political force. The air raid that struck Abu Ali Mustafa's office in al-Bireh was the first targeting a high-profile Palestinian leader. However, few other PFLP members were targeted after him, namely seven between 2000 and 2004. This figure underscored the Israeli army and intelligence perception of the diminished threat posed by the PFLP, especially if compared not only to the 119 Hamas and 73 AMB members killed, but also to the 35 Islamic Jihad operatives hit by targeted assassinations.[60]

The PFLP's Retaliation and the Election of Ahmad Sa'adat

Despite the unprecedented circumstances stemming from Abu Ali's death, the PFLP was able to give a rapid response to its short-term priorities: replying to the blow suffered and filling in the post of Secretary-General. The PFLP's ability to fulfil these tasks appears particularly significant if viewed against its conduct in the remaining years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Indeed, the retaliatory operation organised by the PFLP and the election of a leader who hailed from the OPT network could hint at both an

effective military apparatus and at change in the leadership profile. However, in the longer term, this episode further weakened the PFLP due to its own inability to renew its strategic agenda, allowing the usual patterns of its agency to re-emerge, and because of the difficulty to cope with the larger scale consequences of its actions.

The PFLP acknowledged the "martyrdom" of its Secretary-General with a statement of the leadership in Damascus, a few hours after the Israeli helicopters stormed the building where Abu Ali's office was located. The statement vowed not to "soften the reply to this crime" and affirmed that the PFLP would be up to the challenge that this entailed.[61] To a certain extent, Israel's decision to assassinate Abu Ali, and eliminate the security threat stemming from his command, further confirmed the effectiveness of the late PFLP leader in restructuring the militant network of the organisation in the OPT. Notwithstanding the PFLP's marginal role, Israel moved to kill Abu Ali Mustafa both because of his leading military role and in light of his high political and symbolic relevance. Besides hitting the military organisational capabilities of the Palestinian factions, targeted killings also aimed at eliminating those figures who were politically and diplomatically hostile to Israel, leaving space to more pliable Palestinian partners.[62]

In the immediate aftermath of Abu Ali's death, the PFLP stressed repeatedly that retaliation was its top priority. Once again, the organisation demonstrated its ability to plan and carry out a sophisticated operation in response to such a serious loss. Nonetheless, through its actions, the PFLP helped to unleash events that were beyond its own control, thus confirming its weaknesses whilst simultaneously bringing a harsh wave of repression upon itself. Ultimately, the PFLP's response to the killing of its Secretary-General reflected the extent to which its agency responded to tactical rather than strategic concerns.

The PFLP's retaliation came after the Islamic forty-day mourning period, namely on 17 October 2001, with the carefully-planned killing of Rehavam Ze'evi, Minister of Tourism in Sharon's cabinet. The PFLP identified Ze'evi as the selected target not only for his official post in the Israeli government. Leader of the nationalist Moledet party, the PFLP saw Ze'evi as embodying an "extremist" right-wing trend "even according to Israeli standards". His calls for the "ethnic cleansing" of Palestinians and his adamant opposition to the right of return made him an appropriate objective.[63] The successful operation represented the assassination of the highest Israeli official that a Palestinian faction ever accomplished. The cell

of the "Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades", the new name of the PFLP's armed branch, that carried out the mission was composed of four people under the supervision of Ahid Abu Ghalma, the head of the "Front's military apparatus". The group gathered information according to which Ze'evi would lodge at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, in East Jerusalem on the day of the operation. In the early morning of 17 October, after spending the night in a room of the hotel booked under a false name, two PFLP operatives blocked Ze'evi in his room and shot him dead.[64] On the same day, the PFLP also carried out a suicide bombing that hit an Israeli army outpost in Gaza leaving two soldiers injured in the first confirmed PFLP attack of this kind.[65]

Shortly after the PFLP commando executed Ze'evi's assassination, an official statement issued from the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades publicly claimed the PFLP's responsibility for the killing of the Minister of Tourism.[66] The Israeli army did not wait long to respond. The following day Sharon authorised a full-scale military operation all over the West Bank and for the first time since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the Israeli army reoccupied the West Bank's main cities starting with Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah and completing the occupation of the main inhabited centres by 22 October. The declared goal was forcing Arafat to arrest those who assassinated Ze'evi while definitively quelling the Palestinian factions' military activities. Although the Israeli army withdrew its forces on 26 November after international pressure on Sharon's executive, the government ordered a new operation a couple of weeks later in which the armed forces directly targeted the PNA's institutions and, most notably, started to restrict Arafat's movements; he was de facto confined to the Muqata'a, the compound in Ramallah where he would reside from then on.[67]

In addition to retaliating for Abu Ali Mustafa's death, the PFLP needed to elect a new Secretary-General. The circumstances did not allow the organisation of a new round of the PFLP General Congress, thus the Central Committee carried out the election. The Committee held three separate sessions in Damascus, the West Bank and Gaza, and its choice of candidates reflected the definitive shift of the PFLP leadership towards "inside" cadres. Reportedly, the PFLP's leaders considered names from both the exiled and local leadership. Abu Ahmad Fouad and Abd al-Rahim Malluh stood out among the "outside" leaders. Ribhi Haddad and Ahmad Sa'adat, both prominent leaders of the Palestinian prisoners' movement, emerged as suitable profiles issued from the PFLP's local branch.[68]

Ultimately, the committee elected Sa'adat as the new PFLP Secretary-General on 3 October 2001 while Malluh was chosen as his deputy.[69] Sa'adat's was not among the most renowned PFLP leaders mainly because of his involvement in the PFLP's underground network in the OPT. The new Secretary-General had experienced several arrests by the Israeli forces since a very young age, while after the PNA's establishment it also detained him multiple times. Moreover, from 1994 until his election to the Secretariat, he acted as PFLP Head in the West Bank.[70] Despite the different political backgrounds of the late Abu Ali and Sa'adat, this did not lead to significant change in the PFLP's agenda. Sa'adat incarceration in the months following Ze'evi's killing undoubtedly limited his ability to influence the party line. Nonetheless, the underpinning factors determining the PFLP's policies remained relevant in the wake of this major episode, reconfirming the importance of the PFLP's quest for a better-defined political role in the changing political scenario. Moreover, the PFLP response to Abu Ali's assassination highlighted its ability to answer its tactical priorities while not achieving strategic renewal.

After Abu Ali: "Defensive Shield" and the PFLP's Shift Towards Mediation

The escalation of Israel's military intervention in the OPT marked the first half of 2002. Its reinvasion of the West Bank, beyond the high level of destruction that it caused, left its signs on the Palestinian factions' conduct within the continuing Intifada. The PFLP's military endeavour, as was already highlighted, displayed the same dynamics that affected other factions and that were emphasised in the context of the Israeli military escalation. This, in turn, evidenced the contradiction afflicting the PFLP, between a military approach dictated by factional priorities and a political discourse aimed at mediating between Hamas and Fatah.

Although the Sharon government had been planning such a step in the previous months, Ze'evi's assassination provided the necessary pretext for a reoccupation of the territories and towns located in Area A, under full Palestinian civil and military jurisdiction according to the Oslo accords.[71] Thus, the PFLP's own high-profile revenge coupled with the wide retaliatory campaign to which both the AMB and Hamas were committed. Between 2001 and early 2002, Hamas' suicide bombings multiplied, often hitting beyond the Green Line and inflicting severe civilian casualties.[72] At

the same time, it became clear that the Israeli government aimed at total military victory and potentially at the destruction of the PNA. Within this escalation of the conflict, Israel's request to the PNA to surrender the commandos responsible for Ze'evi's killing was one of the main covers that the Israeli army used to besiege the Muqata'a.[73] Consequently, pressure mounted on the PFLP from both Israeli security forces that started targeting and arresting an increasing number of its militants, and the PNA that moved likewise prompted by Israeli request to "ensure security". In this situation, the PFLP's room for political manoeuvre appeared restricted. On the one hand, the military dynamics of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, as well as the popularity that Hamas' actions enjoyed among the Palestinian population, pushed the PFLP to both organise retaliatory operations and to resort to Hamas' own military strategy with the launch of suicide bombings. On the other hand, national unity remained a priority; therefore, the PFLP continued to maintain a line of contact with Hamas and the PNA in an effort that at times appeared either rhetorical or unrealistic.

This approach clearly emerged in Sa'adat's declarations shortly before the PNA's General Intelligence Service arrested him on 15 January 2002 and subsequently handed him over to the Presidential Guard.[74] For instance, in one of his first interviews, the new PFLP Secretary-General affirmed that the main problem afflicting the Intifada was that military unity among the factions had not been matched by a parallel political unity. Some sort of basic political coordination appeared all the more crucial since after the 11 September attacks and the consequent US "war on terror", the "Palestinian struggle faced a hostile international environment". In a first display of the PFLP's mediating role, Sa'adat invited Hamas and the PNA to pause their irreconcilable respective calls for an immediate end to American tutelage on the peace process and for the implementation of US-drafted plans to stop the Intifada. Sa'adat went so far as to maintain that in the light of Israeli military escalation, the Palestinian factions should put their positions on negotiations aside and create the conditions for a "minimum-level dialogue" that could "immunise the national movement from the danger" of intra-Palestinian fight.[75] In line with this position, the PFLP criticised the PNA for responding promptly to United States and international pressures as Arafat adopted several measures to ensure calm by calling for a ceasefire, outlawing all armed groups that did not abide by it and proceeding with the detention of dozens of militants from all organisations.[76] By the same token, the PFLP espoused critical views concerning Hamas and Islamic Jihad's

military strategy. Although suicide bombings represented a legitimate mean in the fight against occupation, the Islamists' resort to this practice lacked sufficient consideration of strategy and long-term goals. The PFLP accepted the view that suicide bombings could be carried out all over the whole of Palestine, particularly in the light of Israel's "reservists" policy which widened the category of military personnel. Nonetheless, the Palestinian resistance should prioritise settlements and military installation in the OPT as even the long-term goal of total liberation, which the PFLP had substantially abandoned, could be achieved only by first ending the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. The PFLP also condemned the Islamists' ideological framework of suicide bombings. According to the PFLP, their insistence on religious values and individual, spiritual recompense stripped these operations of their nationalist meaning and failed to underscore how "martyrdom" was for a collective cause, not for the self.[77]

Despite the official ideological framework and the criticism of "individualist" practices as well as the lack of strategic depth in resistance activities, these dynamics did not leave the PFLP unaffected, underscoring a certain gap between the political and the military leadership and, again, between "outside" perceptions and "inside" realities. The political leadership, still partly located outside the OPT, formulated a political discourse focusing on collective action and nationalist priorities. The cadres as well as the rank-and-file were more responsive to the priorities of both countering Israeli military operations and asserting their presence within Palestinian resistance activities. In fact, 2002 was the year in which the PFLP carried out the highest number of suicide bombings, namely four over a total of 7/9 between 2001 and 2005.[78] Alongside other kinds of operations, these attacks were often carried out as a retaliation or in protest against Israel and PNA's detention of the PFLP's top leaders, after Malluh too was arrested. Operations took place mainly in West Bank settlements but attackers also pushed beyond the Green Line, carrying out operations as far as the city of Netanya.[79] Ultimately, the PFLP's military action, although far more limited than that of Hamas or of the Fatah-affiliated groups, displayed the prominence of factional priorities in line with the general trend of Palestinian armed struggle during the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The PFLP's decision to launch suicide bombings itself was largely due to intra-factional competition for popular support. As Hamas' strategies gathered popular consensus, the PFLP embarked on this kind of operations in an attempt to respond to pressures coming from its base.[80] Moreover, the Israeli closures and sieges imposed on the West Bank urban

centres, particularly during operation Defensive Shield in Spring 2002, fragmented Palestinian military practice. This negative development affected the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades too, alongside the *tanzim* and other groups based in the West Bank.[81] In a further similarity with the *tanzim*, the PFLP leadership and network in the West Bank suffered the harsh Israeli crackdown while Hamas' leaders in Gaza remained temporarily untouched. As of June 2002, besides numbers of militants, eight PFLP Central Committee members were detained, either by Israel or the PNA. Among them, and in addition to Secretary-General Sa'adat, were his deputy Malluh, Politburo Member and PFLP Spokesperson Ali Jaradat, as well as Military Leader Ahid Abu Ghalma.[82]

After Operation Defensive Shield, the Al-Aqsa Intifada was far from over but followed a pattern that repeated itself until Arafat's death in November 2004 and the end of the uprising in February 2005. Confined to his compound, the PNA President had little choice but to try to respond to US and Israeli requirements in order to avoid the Israeli army moving to either arrest or kill him. Thus, the PNA embarked on a double track of talks with the United States and Israel as well as with the Palestinian factions. The main goal of the intra-Palestinian dialogue was securing a stable ceasefire that, in the PNA's hopes, would prefigure an end to the Israeli assault in the OPT and the siege on the Muqata'a.[83] In these circumstances, the PFLP hoped to play a positive role in drawing Hamas and Fatah closer. This was not only an attempt to forge the long-invoked unified leadership, but also to counterbalance the "external" pressure for reform that clashed with the PFLP's vision for change. By the end of the uprising's second year the PFLP was left with few means to continue a military effort that totally lacked any strategic depth. Deprived of both one of its historical leaders and his successor, the PFLP turned all of its attention to intra-factional and institutional politics to salvage its already limited political weight within an uncertain political landscape.

The PFLP's Mediation in the Intra-Palestinian Dialogue

The final years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada were marked by the PNA's attempts to reassert some degree of control on the Palestinian "street" involved in the confrontation against Israel while trying to respond to US and Israeli political requirements in order to relieve the military pressure that the

Sharon government continued to exert. This prompted an intra-Palestinian dialogue focused on reforming the PNA in which the PFLP appeared interested as it still pursued, on the political level, a reconfiguration of the Palestinian national movement based on consensus. Therefore, the PFLP gradually shifted towards a role of mediation that tried to address both Hamas' hard line and the PNA's need to recompose the national movement under its leadership. Consequently, the PFLP's narrative and line continued to fluctuate between the priorities spelled by the two main, contrasting poles of Palestinian politics.

As part of the deal that put an end to Operation Defensive Shield in May 2002, the PNA agreed to transfer Sa'adat and other Palestinian prisoners from the Muqata'a compound to Jericho prison, where their custody would be under US and UK supervision.[84] This formula eliminated one of the Sharon government's main pretexts to corner Arafat both militarily and diplomatically. However, US and Israeli pressures on the PNA's President did not stop as both parties started to call for in-depth reform of the PNA's institutional structure and security forces. The first demand advanced by both the Bush administration and the Sharon government was essentially a change in the PNA's leadership as Arafat no longer represented a "suitable" partner for negotiations.[85] In sum, the US and Israeli governments demanded the empowerment of the PNA government while seeking the emancipation of the executive from the President. Pressure in this direction eventually resulted in Arafat's appointment in March 2003 of Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as first PNA Prime Minister. The publication of the US-drafted "Road Map for peace in the Middle East" a month after Abbas' appointment, in which the concept of empowering an autonomous Palestinian government was restated, confirmed the Bush administration's willingness to sideline Arafat.[86] In addition, the United States and Israel also invoked the unification of the different Palestinian security services. This measure would allow the realisation of some conditions that both Washington and Tel Aviv deemed essential, namely halting the participation of the PNA's security forces in the Intifada and their return to coordination with the Israeli counterpart in policing Palestinian resistance activities.[87] Although the US agenda for change pursued a reassertion of control over the PNA and the suppression of Palestinian military activity, it nonetheless fostered a momentum of debate around reform, in which the whole national movement participated. Starting from totally different point of views, all actors concerned with the evolution of

Palestinian politics since the Al-Aqsa Intifada were interested in deep change within the PNA.

The issue of reforms became central in the debate within the Palestinian national movement, following Arafat's own call for change in the aftermath of Defensive Shield. Hence, the Palestinian factions started a series of talks with the inclusion of the Islamist factions, notably Hamas, aimed at drafting a common political line. Reforming the PNA had been a PFLP slogan since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, as the organisation itself underlined contentiously in a statement issued in response to Arafat's announcement. Nevertheless, the kind of reform that the United States and Israel pushed for was totally in contrast with the PFLP's view of democratising the PNA's institutions and revitalising the PLO.[88] From this stemmed the PFLP's efforts to ensure a full and protracted participation of the Islamist factions in the intra-Palestinian dialogue. At the same time, a successful mediation between Hamas and Fatah would have guaranteed to the PFLP an "institutional" role within Palestinian politics. The PFLP's willingness to grant the PNA a nationalist cover, its discourse around "turning the PNA into a national and political entity for the people" standing up to US and Israeli agendas, should be viewed through this perspective.[89]

In this context, the PFLP presented to the whole Palestinian national movement several "initiatives" throughout 2003 in an attempt to foster intra-Palestinian dialogue. The main challenge that the PFLP had to face in this action was to contain the polarisation process of Palestinian politics which was well underway in the midst of the Al-Aqsa Intifada.[90] Such proposals revolved around the idea of forming a unified national leadership and reviving the framework of the PLO. Both PLO factions and the Islamist organisations were to be full partners in the unified leadership. Such leadership would be charged with implementing a "nationalist program" in support of the Intifada as well as supervising a wide electoral process to renew all national institutions, from municipalities up to the PNC.[91] The generality of political slogans and of the long-term goals linked to these initiatives contrasted with the detailed description of how to ensure the process of dialogue and readjust Palestinian political balances. This hinted at the fact that the PFLP's real interests lay in the process of dialogue itself, a process that would guarantee its role of mediation.

Nonetheless, after almost a year since its beginning, the intra-Palestinian dialogue failed to reach a breakthrough. Hamas repeatedly refused to recognise the PLO as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people

and to formally commit to the framework of a Palestinian state limited to the OPT.[92] In light of such difficulties, the PFLP tried to adapt its proposals in order to lend them more credibility in Hamas' eyes. The new initiatives, issued between April and September 2003, called for the inclusion of additional Hamas and Islamic Jihad representatives within a "temporary" unified leadership alongside the Secretaries-General of all the Palestinian factions, PLO Executive Committee members and independent personalities. In a further clarification, the PFLP outlined a sort of chain of command according to which, after the completion of the electoral process, the enlarged PLO would exert control over a PNA entrusted with the task of carrying out the parts of the programme relating to the OPT.[93] Beyond these aspects related to institutional reform, the PFLP tried to bolster its initiative by invoking a halt to the fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement. Indeed, if the unfolding of the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the Israeli military response to it had favoured fragmentation within the Palestinian camp, according to Sa'adat, the US call for a new Palestinian leadership, and their requirements concerning a stronger, autonomous government, underscored the divisive effect of the Road Map.[94]

US and Israeli practices did foster Palestinian political fragmentation. The unabated Israeli arrest and assassination campaigns undermined the weak basis of intra-Palestinian dialogue embodied by the unilateral ceasefire that Abbas, newly nominated Palestinian Premier, managed to broker among all factions in summer 2003. Nonetheless, the continued Israeli military assault could not but push towards the re-ignition of violence and the resumption of suicide operations.[95] However, internal factors also impeded a wider and more effective dialogue. While both the Bush administration and the Sharon government overtly called for "regime change" in Ramallah, all Palestinian factions started to ponder a post-Arafat scenario. Hamas, for instance, was experiencing a phase of internal debate between the "inside" leadership favourable to the acceptance of the post-Oslo political system and the "outside" cadres, more tied to the importance of armed struggle. At the same time, the Islamist movement kept escalating its military operations to reinforce its political position within the Palestinian arena as well as bolster its popularity. Indeed, by the second half of 2002, Hamas saw its popular support rising, thanks to its military effectiveness and its undisputed commitment to armed resistance which contrasted with Fatah's divisions and the PNA's adherence to peace negotiations. Moreover, Hamas' efficient welfare network further highlighted

its ability to support the population in the dire conditions of the uprising, again, in opposition to the PNA's besieged and dysfunctional institutions.[96] Therefore, Hamas' calculation did not change even after Israel's assassination of its spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and top leader Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi, as well as after Sharon announced his decision to disengage army and settlement installations from the Gaza Strip.[97] Hamas needed to keep up a resistance effort that was significantly increasing its popularity in the OPT before times were ripe for intra-Palestinian political settlement.[98]

The PFLP, too, was interested in finding its role in case Arafat left power and intra-Palestinian talks on reforms reached a breakthrough. Despite the statements affirming the intention and the need to continue the Intifada, the PFLP did not have the material means nor a leadership willing to pursue an escalation. In fact, the PFLP abided by the Abbas-negotiated ceasefire in June 2003 and although Palestinian armed attacks resumed after less than two months, the PFLP did not claim any operation until March 2004.[99] This hinted at the PFLP's interest in bolstering intra-Palestinian dialogue initiative, even when these came as a response to US pressure such as in the case of the Abbas-brokered ceasefire. However, the prolonged absence of the PFLP from the military scene was also telling of its material and organisational problems, aggravated by the harsh Israeli and PNA repression that hit the Front. Moreover, the PFLP continued to take part in the Palestinian debate emphasising institutional rearrangement in the OPT and detailing its view on the future role of the PNA's institutions. Be it the Municipalities, the Security Forces or the PLC, the PFLP did not question their legitimacy as Oslo creations anymore but saw these institutions as the only basis upon which to rebuild the Palestinian national movement and the only framework that might ensure the survival of the Front itself.[100] In the polarised political field that the Al-Aqsa Intifada helped to shape, the PFLP tried to fill the narrow space left between Hamas and Fatah/PNA. Since the beginning of intra-Palestinian talks in late 2002/early 2003, the PFLP started swinging between the acceptance of potentially unifying political programmes and adherence to armed struggle in the context of the ongoing military uprising on the ground.[101]

Yasser Arafat died on 11 November 2004 and the Palestinian national movement as a whole entered almost immediately a phase of transition leading to the end of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The PFLP's readiness to close with the Intifada appeared clear in its decision not to boycott the January

2005 presidential election set to elect Arafat's successor. Unlike Hamas, which boycotted the presidential ballot, the PFLP believed in the "need to run (…) the elections" in the delicate phase that started after Arafat passed away.[102] However, the PFLP decided to avoid presenting its own candidate for the presidency and instead supported the bid of former PPP Secretary-General Mustafa Barghouti.[103] Although the PFLP did not support Abbas during the election, it nonetheless ensured its "collaboration on the shared parts of the political program".[104] More than having actual implications, such willingness to collaborate from an opposition stand signalled the PFLP's support for the Abbas-led transition. Finally, after the newly elected PNA President successfully negotiated with Israel in Sharm el-Sheikh a mutual ceasefire in February 2005, the PFLP de facto accepted the end of the Second Intifada a month later. Alongside all other Palestinian factions, the PFLP signed the "Cairo Declaration" in March 2005, according to which the Palestinian forces agreed to respect "the current climate of calm" existing in the OPT after the Sharm el-Sheikh talks.[105]

After more than four years of militarised uprising, the PFLP reached an unprecedented low in its overall condition. The gap with Fatah and Hamas in terms of popularity further increased during the Al-Aqsa Intifada and was eventually solidified during the 2006 legislative elections.[106] The lower degree of repression endured during the uprising compared to the other major Palestinian factions was telling of the PFLP's reduced weight. Furthermore, Abu Ali Mustafa's assassination and Ahmad Sa'adat's continued detention further weakened the PFLP. These two major events underscored the lack of leadership renewal, particularly in relation to Abu Ali's death, as no PFLP top leader could match him in terms of popularity, national stature and experience. Sa'adat leadership benefitted from his credentials as underground activist and leader of the prisoners' movement, but his continued detention prevented him from effectively taking the reins of the PFLP. The remaining representatives of the PFLP's Politburo and Central Committee were still divided between Damascus, such as Abu Ahmad Fouad or Maher al-Taher, and the OPT as in Jamil al-Majdalawi and Abd al-Rahim Malluh's case. These personalities drew their political legitimacy from the institutional role they had within the PFLP and the PLO but did not enjoy the grassroots popular support of Hamas' cadres and leaders. Thus, the PFLP's elitist profile appeared further emphasised in the concluding years of the uprising. At the same time, lacking a strong leadership and a clear political line, the PFLP, like Fatah's *tanzim*, was

drawn into the revenge-driven Palestinian military response that ultimately favoured only Hamas in political terms.[107]

Marginalised and unable to sustain the Intifada effort, the PFLP leadership started adhering to a mediating role that produced an official discourse focused on resistance and unity contrasting with the PFLP's abidance to Abbas' transition plan. In light of its mediating position, new embodiment of the opposition-integration dilemma, the PFLP's policy fluctuation was further emphasised as the unfolding of the 2007 split between Hamas and Fatah showed.

The Opposition-Integration Dilemma in Post-Arafat Palestinian Politics

The narrative accompanying the PFLP's positions during the post-Intifada phase did not differ considerably from that underlying its positions on the eve of the uprising. Unable to stop and delegitimise the Oslo state-building process at the end of the 1990s, the PFLP was left with the only choice of embracing it, thus pushing its historical role of "loyal opposition" one step forward. Democratising the Oslo-derived institutions, transforming them into the new core of a unified national movement, alongside a reactivated PLO, became the new overall political goal. Similarly, slogans pointing at democratisation and unity accompanied the PFLP's participation in the post-Intifada political and institutional reorganisation of the Palestinian national movement. From this perspective, elections represented an essential step in that direction.[108]

The rationale behind the PFLP's decision to join the PNA institutions stemmed from its need to secure some legitimacy in an increasingly polarised political environment. In fact, Mahmud Abbas wanted to use the electoral process to compact Fatah behind his new leadership and subsequently give a new start to the peace process with Israel. For its part, Hamas was now for the first time able to challenge Fatah primacy over the Palestinian national movement.[109] While the two main Palestinian organisations had conflicting agendas, making the possibility of long-term collaboration unlikely, the PFLP needed to institutionalise its political presence and carve out a role for itself between the two poles. As the PFLP sought inclusion into the new political regime, some major inconsistencies resurfaced in its conduct both during the electoral process and throughout the Hamas-Fatah crisis. The main critical points stemmed from the

unresolved conflict between its oppositional role and the need for integration and the enduring fragmentation of the Palestinian Left. In particular, the PFLP's dilemma on opposition-integration resulted in a contradictory relation with Hamas. In the post-Intifada phase, the PFLP and Hamas seemed to be closer in their opposition to Fatah and the PNA's leadership. The two movements forged a tactical alliance during the 2005 Municipal Election that brought, for instance, to the appointment of PFLP-affiliated candidate Janet Mikha'il as mayor of Ramallah.[110] Nonetheless, the PFLP's need to remain engaged within the PLO and PNA framework eventually determined a shift closer to Fatah and the PNA leadership.

The decision to run in the January 2006 elections set to elect the new PLC posed the issue of forming a common list of "democratic and leftist forces". In the run-up to the ballot, the main Palestinian leftist forces thus held talks to reach an agreement on the composition of the common electoral list.[111] The Palestinian Left had already supported different candidates during the 2005 presidential election and, despite several rounds of talks, factionalism continued to haunt the Popular and Democratic Fronts, the PPP, Fida and Mustafa Barghouti's Palestinian National Initiative (PNI).[112] Ultimately, after months of talks, Ahmad Sa'adat announced to the Palestinian news agency Wafa that the PFLP would run its own list in the upcoming elections following the failure to reach an entente among all forces. The PFLP Secretary-General first mentioned differences over "projects to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict", most notably the Road Map, as a reason behind the failure of talks. Disputes over the approach towards the Road Map stirred divisions particularly between the PFLP and the DFLP as the latter movement maintained a more positive view of the US plan. However, Sa'adat also acknowledged disagreement over the composition of the list itself and the allocation of shares to each faction. The PFLP and the DFLP did not manage to agree on the order of candidates running in the list as well as on the weight each faction should enjoy. In addition, the PNI was unwilling to concede the "lion's share" to the PFLP and its leader refused to give up figuring as the front runner.[113] Both factions reportedly claimed they should be allocated the 20% of the seats won in the elections, as each of them took credit for the 20% that Barghouti scored during the previous 2005 Presidential elections.[114]

As a consequence, the Palestinian leftist factions formed three different lists, thus irremediably scattering their supporters' vote. This appeared particularly penalising in light of the parallel proportional and district-based systems that the electoral law designed. Ultimately, the division of

leftist forces as well as the lack of a grassroots-based campaign resulted in a disappointing result that brought only three seats to the PFLP and a total of seven to the whole Left.[115] Therefore, the electoral performance represented a litmus of the PFLP's political marginalisation. Furthermore, while divisions emerged as the main cause of electoral failure, it also highlighted the inconsistency of the PFLP's discourse. Indeed, the stress put on the importance of "common denominators" among the Palestinian factions found no confirmation in the PFLP's own practice as it was clearly unable to find a denominator uniting the Palestinian Left.

Internal struggles also crippled Fatah as the reformist new guard tried to challenge the conservative old guard leadership. Mahmud Abbas managed to close the ranks of the movement just one week before the election, unifying the official Fatah list with an independent list assembled by the reformists.[116] Divisions, the absence of a proper electoral campaign and association with a dysfunctional and corrupt PNA resulted in Fatah's resounding defeat. Conversely, Hamas was ready to capitalise on popular discontent towards the PNA. A well-organised campaign that touched all electoral districts and a programme centred on reforming all aspects of Palestinian institutions and governance allowed Hamas' "Change and Reform" list to win seventy-four seats in stark contrast to the forty-five seats assigned to Fatah.[117]

Although opinion polls predicted that Hamas would score a good result in the election, none of the parties in the ballot expected such an overwhelming victory.[118] Fatah's reaction, as that of Israel and the United States, was one of shock and rejection. In the initial aftermath of the election, Fatah's leadership consistently rejected Hamas' proposals to form a national unity government. Abbas extended presidential control over the PNA Security Forces as well as the Finance and Information Ministries in violation of the Basic Law that ascribed authority over these institutions to the Prime Minister. The Israeli government, for its part, accompanied its refusal to recognise the new Palestinian government with a set of economic sanctions and stopped transferring taxes to the PNA. The United States aligned with Israel's position and conditioned its recognition of the government on Hamas' acceptance of the Oslo accords and Israel's right to exist as well as the abandonment of armed struggle.[119] Abbas' move to contain the new Hamas government signalled the first phase of a power struggle that did not remain limited to the PNA. As the new parliament and government took office, tensions between the two poles of the Palestinian national movement moved from institutions to the OPT street,

particularly in Gaza. Violent demonstrations led by Fatah activists alternated with clashes between forces loyal to the two movements and armed skirmishes became more frequent at the end of the year.[120]

While Hamas-Fatah tensions heightened in the wake of the elections, the PFLP positioned itself in between the two poles of Palestinian politics. On the one hand, the PFLP welcomed Hamas' success as a "victory of the Intifada program" which implied the Palestinian people's rejection of the Oslo paradigm. On the other hand, Hamas' reluctance to join the PLO as well as divergences over UN resolutions, especially number 194 which sanctioned the Palestinian refugees' right of return, prevented the PFLP's full embrace of the new Hamas government. Ultimately, the PFLP manifested its willingness to collaborate with Hamas in reforming the PNA while also expressing solidarity for the "external pressure" that the Islamist movement endured following its electoral success.[121] Therefore, during the first session of the new PLC, Jamil al-Majdalawi declared that the PFLP would grant its vote of confidence to the incumbent Hamas government, though the aforementioned differences prevented it from directly joining the cabinet.[122] The events surrounding its Secretary-General probably pushed the PFLP closer to Hamas in this first phase. On 14 March 2006, the Israeli army launched a raid on Jericho prison aimed at seizing a group of "wanted" detainees, among whom figured Ahmad Sa'adat. The US and UK forces supposed to monitor the PNA detention of Sa'adat and his fellow prisoners withdrew from their positions, allowing the Israeli army to besiege the detention facility and seize the prisoners, who were eventually transferred onto Israeli soil.[123] The PFLP harshly criticised the PNA, despite its security forces resisting the attackers for twelve hours, and Sa'eb 'Erekat, Minister of Negotiations, acknowledged the PNA's mistake in detaining Sa'adat. According to the PFLP, the "Palestinian official leadership" abided by the agreement concerning Sa'adat in the hope of acquiring a better position at the negotiating table, but the Israeli raid showed that "these illusions collapsed just like the Jericho prison walls did".[124]

However, with the ongoing Hamas-Fatah power struggle, the PFLP moved towards a neutral position between the two contenders hoping that mediation would grant it a national role. In this context, a few months after refusing to take part in the first Hamas-proposed national unity government, the PFLP adopted the formation of a consensus executive as its main political priority. Therefore, the PFLP endorsed a "National Consensus Document" drafted by a group of high-profile prisoners,

ranging from Fatah's Marwan Barghouti and Hamas' Abd al-Khalik al-Natshe to PFLP's Abd al-Rahim Malluh. The document, submitted to all leaders of the Palestinian national movement, called for the reactivation of the PLO while identifying the protection of the PNA as a top priority given its status of "core of the future State of Palestine". In an attempt to settle the issues at the centre of the intra-Palestinian conflict, the document identified the PLO leadership and the PNA presidency as the actor in charge of negotiations, while inviting the PLC, now under Hamas control, to legislate on the functioning of the security apparatus in order to avoid "political and partisan actions by members of the security services".[125]

However, the call coming from the Israeli prisons did not raise much interest in its supposed recipients. The PFLP basically supported the document because it proposed an ideal settlement of a two-faction conflict where all Palestinian actors would play a role. Furthermore, the document delineated an artificial balance between the PLO and the PNA according to which the latter was emanation of the first. However, this view apparently ignored the overlap between PNA and PLO as well as the fact that the Hamas-Fatah dispute was entirely about control over the OPT and the PNA's institutions with no regard for wider political frameworks. This view was in line with PFLP's goal but could not work as a viable base for reconciliation.[126]

The PFLP's stand towards the unfolding of the Hamas-Fatah confrontation throughout 2007 confirmed that, beyond political rhetoric, its main goal was seeking institutional integration from a possible intra-factional settlement. The PFLP's rejection of the February 2007 Mecca Agreement that Hamas and Fatah reached, thanks to Saudi mediation, came to prove it. The document signed in Mecca essentially stated that the two factions agreed to stop Palestinian infighting while affirming the principle of Hamas-Fatah power-sharing, calling for a new national unity government. The signed text of the agreement came with a letter that Abbas addressed to Hamas Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyeh in which the PNA President called on the Prime Minister to "respect the international and Arab resolutions and the agreements signed by the PLO".[127] The PFLP put forward the contents of this letter to justify its negative position towards the Mecca agreement. According to its Politburo Statement, the reference to PLO-Israeli agreements prevented the PFLP's participation in the national unity government. Therefore, while it welcomed the end of intra-Palestinian clashes, the PFLP defined the bilateral agreement as a

regression from the National Consensus Document and also criticised the factional redistribution between Fatah and Hamas.[128] But what the PFLP really protested was its exclusion from this reconciliation deal and the bilateral nature of the agreement. Hamas had signalled its acceptance of the Oslo accords' result when Khalid Mish'al publicly declared that his movement recognised that the "PNA was founded on the basis of Oslo" and agreed to "deal with this reality".[129] As the contending parties seemed resolved to head towards reconciliation, the PFLP line fluctuated, following its need for institutional integration.

The "First Palestinian Coup" or the PFLP's Ultimate Choice for Integration

The final phases of the Hamas-Fatah conflict in 2007 showed that the PFLP ultimately prioritised its engagement within the framework of traditional PLO and PNA institutions over its oppositional role. Indeed, if both Hamas and Fatah pursued hegemonic policies in the context of their confrontation, the PFLP ended up prioritising the legitimacy of institutions over the legitimacy of the electoral process. However, this put the PFLP's political credibility in further jeopardy and reiterated its pattern of fluctuations.

Despite Fatah and Hamas apparently abided to the terms of the Mecca agreement, a true, viable reconciliation could not be implemented. Intra-factional clashes continued regularly in the first half of 2007 while the institutional impasse due to the block on international aid to the Hamas government aggravated the degradation of security in the OPT, particularly in Gaza. More importantly, both Fatah and Hamas were increasingly engaged in an arms race aimed at acquiring military superiority in order to prevail in case of a final showdown.[130] Within Fatah, hard-line elements supporting the idea of removing Hamas from power militarily had acquired considerable power, also thanks to US support for their line. Most prominent among them was Muhammad Dahlan, former head of the PNA's Preventive Security Forces and Fatah strongman in Gaza. Thanks to the US-Fatah hardliners coordination, in late 2006 military aid started to flow towards those branches of the security services falling under presidential control and headed by Fatah hardliners.[131] By the same token Hamas, reportedly relying on Iranian support, strengthened its own armed branch, the al-Qassam brigades, as well as the Executive Security Forces

established right after the formation of the first Hamas government.[132] While clashes continued unabated and security in the OPT deteriorated, rumours of an impending Fatah-led coup started to spread. Tensions peaked in June 2007: after renewed Fatah-Hamas armed confrontation in Gaza, Hamas forces seized control of the whole Strip, taking over the PNA's administrative and security institutions and expelling Fatah partisans in a pre-emptive move aimed at preventing a Fatah coup.[133]

The PFLP, which had repeatedly denounced the "militarisation" of the Fatah-Hamas conflict and the ensuing arms race between the two factions, did not hesitate to condemn Hamas' takeover as the "first Palestinian coup d'état". In the words of Politburo member Abu Ali Hasan, Hamas' move represented a coup against "Palestinian legitimacy and its institutions". More specifically, it was a coup against the provisions of the Mecca agreement, against the national unity government and against the principle of "political partnership" stated by the PNA's laws.[134] The position that the PFLP adopted towards the Hamas seizure appeared in contradiction, at least partially, with the stances maintained since the 2006 legislative election. The PFLP denounced the violation of a specific agreement that it had rejected as well as the collapse of a national unity government in which it refused to participate.

More generally, as the PFLP condemned Hamas' breach of the legitimacy stemming from the PNA's institutions and laws, it seemed to sanctify a legitimacy that it had long contested and that stemmed from a set of Israel-PLO accords it still rejected. Ultimately, the PFLP completed a trajectory that brought it from a position closer to the Hamas government to one closer to Fatah and the PNA Presidency. Although the PFLP criticised Abbas' decision to dissolve the national unity government and establish an emergency executive, its position substantially validated Fatah's stance towards Hamas.[135] In the PFLP's narration of the crisis, Hamas' military takeover was seen as a major turning point irremediably aggravating the intra-Palestinian power struggle. Nonetheless, the PFLP failed to put on the same level the US-Fatah contacts that consistently tried to undermine Hamas' democratically elected government. Although "external pressures" on the Haniyeh government were mentioned in the PFLP's discourse, there was no reference to the widely known relationship between the Bush administration and Fatah hardliners led by Muhammad Dahlan. The PFLP mainly stressed how Hamas' military seizure of the Gaza Strip fulfilled the long-standing Israeli goal of fragmenting the Palestinian polity in the OPT or how it represented a step against the "Palestinian

democratic tradition" of intra-factional dialogue and consensus seeking.[136] Furthermore, in an institutional step that provided a nationalist cover to the Fatah-controlled PNA, the PFLP participated in the PLO Central Council meeting convened in the aftermath of Hamas' takeover. Although the PFLP opposed the measures approved by the Council, such as the establishment of an emergency cabinet or the approval of Abbas' participation in a new round of US-supervised negotiations with Israel, its participation helped to ensure the necessary institutional cover to the PNA. This move contrasted with the PFLP's frequent decision in its history to boycott PLO institutions to deprive opposed policies of a national consensus.[137]

Despite its nominal opposition to Abbas' line in the wake of the crisis and his decision to pursue talks with Israel in the following years, the PFLP de facto sided with the Fatah-controlled PNA during the height of the conflict. Thus, the fluctuation of the PFLP's position throughout the 2006–2007 events was telling of its inability to adopt a truly independent position. This was due to the PFLP leadership's economic and political dependence on the framework of the PLO and, after 2006, on that of the PNA institutions. Therefore, facing the formation of two distinct Palestinian polities, the PFLP needed to stand closer to its traditional reference framework which ensured institutional integration and economic survival for its cadres. The PFLP's inability, and indeed of the whole Palestinian Left, to "de-participate" from this framework prevented the emergence of a viable "third way", notwithstanding the PFLP's early calls in that sense.[138] Consequently, the PFLP's political agency appeared definitively discredited and its mediation attempts as little more than a rhetorical exercise. This was evident in the limited popularity that the PFLP continued to enjoy among the Palestinian masses. The poor electoral performance during local and student council elections in the following years throughout the West Bank, in which lists associated with the PFLP generally did not win more than five or seven seats, reflected to some extent the persistent inability of the PFLP to reverse such a decline in its popularity.[139] Today, the PFLP's marginalisation appears all the more irreversible in light of the continued political and geographical polarisation of Palestinian politics. The seemingly unresolvable division between Hamas and Fatah and the serious dysfunction of both the Hamas government in Gaza and the Fatah-controlled PNA in the West Bank is determining an ongoing crisis of leadership legitimacy.[140]

Notwithstanding the need for an alternative to the current bipolar impasse, the PFLP, along all other Palestinian factions, has been consistently unable to embody it due to its dependence on traditional, yet dysfunctional, tools of intra-Palestinian dialogue and from void Palestinian institutions.

Conclusions

The decade that followed Abu Ali Mustafa's return to Palestine in 1999 crystallised the PFLP's dependence from traditional Palestinian institutions. From the PNA "state-building" phase in the mid-1990s, throughout all the Al-Aqsa Intifada, up to the Hamas-Fatah split, the PFLP desperately sought to maintain its integration in old, new as well as temporary Palestinian fora and institutions. Integration overtook opposition in the fundamental PFLP's dilemma, but policy fluctuation endured, nonetheless. Within a polarising national movement, the PFLP's main option to maintain some relevance was mediating between Hamas' radical opposition and the Fatah-led PNA. Consequently, its line oscillated between ineffective opposition to the PNA's autocratic drift and calls for the "protection" of Palestinian legality, be it PLO or PNA-derived; between supporting the escalation of the Intifada and working for capitalising politically on the uprising. The ultimate adherence to the overlapping PLO and PNA institutions shattered the PFLP's oppositional credentials, relegating the organisation to irreversible marginalisation.

During the second half of the 1990s, the PFLP's discourse on "democratising" the PNA not only signalled its acceptance of the Oslo political regime, but also its will to actively participate in it. The focus on democratisation led many PFLP and leftist activist to join the nascent NGO movement which became a leftist surrogate for party politics. However, while having little democratising effect on the PNA, the leftist overrepresentation in western-funded NGOs, fostered the perception of a Palestinian Left fully compromised with the Oslo political and economic regime.

At the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the PFLP hoped that the new uprising would pave the way for a new consensus in the Palestinian national movement as the Oslo peace process collapsed violently: a return to collective decision-making might have lent the PFLP some of the lost influence. But as the Intifada turned into an asymmetric war, the uprising became a framework for competition between Hamas, Fatah's *tanzim* and the Arafat-led PNA. Against this background, the whole Palestinian Left

appeared sidelined and the PFLP fluctuated between Hamas "resistant" discourse, closer to Hamas, and a pragmatic approach concerning national unity and possible new frameworks for the peace process, closer to Fatah's leadership and the PNA. The PFLP's mediating efforts throughout the uprising appeared more as botched synthesis of Hamas and Fatah priorities which in fact reflected the conflict between two bids for hegemony on the OPT and the whole national movement. The heavy toll that the Al-Aqsa Intifada took on the PFLP's membership and structure in the OPT, notably with the assassination of its Secretary-General, further complicated the PFLP's chances of recovery.

Following Arafat's death, as the uprising wound down, the PFLP's need for institutional inclusion remained pressing. Thus, unlike in 1996, it never doubted its support and participation in both the 2005 presidential and 2006 legislative elections. However, the need for institutional inclusion emphasised the PFLP's inconsistencies in the new political environment. Moreover, its shortcomings in terms of coalition building and electoral campaigning, linked to the long-standing issue of leftist factionalism, further highlighted the party's political decline. As the Hamas-Fatah conflict intensified following the Islamists' electoral victory, the PFLP moved from a position closer to Hamas in the wake of the elections to siding with Fatah after the Islamist takeover of Gaza in June 2007. In this case too, the PFLP's inability to disengage from the PLO/PNA's institutional framework was at the base of its policy fluctuation.

More than a decade following the Palestinian geographical and political split, the two main poles of Palestinian politics rule over the impasse despite a clear legitimacy crisis. Nonetheless, the PLO Left, and the PFLP at its forefront, is still unable to embody a credible "third way". Political and material dependence from mainstream Palestinian institutions continues to be the main obstacle to leftist renewal, particularly as it continues to clash with the Left's rhetorical opposition to the Oslo political regime. More than three decades following its full emergence, the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma remain unresolved, perpetuating its political irrelevance.

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CHAPTER 7

Paths of Decline and Renewal: The PFLP and Leftist Trajectories Across Time

Introduction

The conundrum of relations between Marxist organisations and nationalist forces within national liberation movement in the region was clearly not a Palestinian exclusive. Left-wing parties in the Middle East and North Africa have frequently collaborated with political actors established on different ideological bases for the sake of national emancipation from colonial dominance and neo-colonial influence. But the flip side of collaboration was competition for prominence within the national liberation movement which often led to overt conflict, particularly when nationalist forces emerged as the dominant actor. In this framework, the ability of leftist organisations to elaborate an original and convincing platform for the national project represents a fundamental factor determining political success and influence.

In Egypt, since its inception in the early 1920, the communist movement consistently prioritised national liberation, leading communist activists to seek collaboration with other forces, particularly during the 1940s. The fragmented Egyptian communist movement put socialist transformation high on its agenda too and acted accordingly, for instance by playing a pioneering role in labour unionisation. Nonetheless, national liberation represented by far the most important cause for the communists, which articulated all of their political activities around that goal. In pursuing this objective, Egypt's communists ended up acting within a political framework that they did not define, while pan-Arab nationalism

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conquered cultural and political hegemony within the national movement. The communist secondary position, similar to the PFLP's, produced significant dilemmas, notably the one stemming from seeking collaboration, and later integration, with a repressive political actor, rejecting all competing forces. The thrust to integration, interrupted by ferocious repression, designed a fluctuating trajectory leading to an ultimate political marginalisation.

Conversely, within the variegated Kurdish national movement, Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), managed to elaborate its own radical, leftist approach to Kurdish national emancipation. Breaking with traditional embodiments of the Kurdish national movement, the PKK gave to the socialist transformation of society as well as to progressive individual transformation a greater prominence than to nationalist separatism and state-building. Such conception of its action and the theoretical contribution of its founding leader allowed the PKK to stand up to major challenges by re-elaborating its radical political platform. Therefore, Ocalan's party distinguished itself from a Palestinian Left which never emancipated from Arab and Palestinian nationalism and did not produce an equally comprehensive leftist case for national liberation. Adherence to the formulation of a revolutionary and counterhegemonic project is what granted radical coherence to the PKK, notwithstanding its major transformations. The PFLP and the Palestinian Left's abandonment of such task took its heavy toll and helped in strengthening those dynamics leading to political marginalisation.

The Communist Movement in Egypt (1921–1952): Primacy of the National Cause

Academics and activists alike have traditionally divided the history of Egyptian communism in three "movements", following the rise and fall of the organisations and leaders that animated each phase. Socialist ideas penetrated Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century mainly due to the initiative of members of the large foreign communities living in the country who had links with the socialist organisations of their homelands. However, the first attempt to set up a socialist political party was in 1921 with the establishment of the Socialist Party of Egypt to be renamed as Communist Party of Egypt (CPE) in 1923.

Since its inception, the Egyptian communist movement kept the national cause and the struggle against British imperialism high on its agenda. In the aftermath of the 1919 anti-British revolution, Egyptian communists expressed on several occasions their support for the Wafd, the dominant, nationalist party, in its confrontation with the British authorities over independence. But common views on the national cause with the liberal Wafd were not matched by a shared sensibility on social issues as communist activists pioneered unionisation among working-class Egyptians. The Wafd represented the bourgeois, landowning Egyptian elites; therefore, it did not take long before it clashed with the communists following its arrival to government in 1924. The repression and arrest of Marxist activists and leaders in the mid-1920s put an end to the first Egyptian communist movement as several attempts to revive it in later years failed in their goal. Wafdist repression of communist activities embodied the first emergence of an enduring contradiction between Egyptian nationalists and communists which would resurface frequently in the following decades.[1]

But the national cause also showed the internal implications that it entailed for the communist movement. As early as the 1920s, the central position of national liberation in communist activism posed a dilemma concerning the role of foreign nationals in the movement, notably Jewish intellectuals who held European citizenships or acquired Egyptian nationality after settling in the country. The expulsion of Joseph Rosenthal, one of the most prominent Jewish Marxist leaders in Egypt, from the CPE in 1924, testified to the smouldering tensions within the movement.[2] Furthermore, the urgency of national liberation that Egyptian Marxists felt distracted them from elaborating a firm organisational structure and thorough theoretical bases. In later years, this issue would emerge again, contributing to the fragmentation of the movement, even during its "golden age" between the mid-1930 and the early 1950s.[3]

After the end of the first movement, communist activism entered a new phase starting from the second half of the 1930s. Again, the initiative of European residents and that of both foreign and Egyptian Jews played a central role in sparking the second communist movement. The rise of fascism in Europe was a matter of great concern for the Jews in Egypt and also preoccupied many within the Greek, Italian and French communities. The fascist danger was felt closely in Egypt too as anti-British sentiment led members of the Egyptian nationalist intelligentsia to sympathise with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. At the same time, grassroots fascist-inspired

movements, such as *Misr al-Fatat* (Young Egypt), grew in popularity as they contested the ruling Wafd, seen as a morally corrupt party, excessively lenient to the British occupation. The other face of popular social conservatism was the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) which moved similar criticism to the Wafd rule spelled in the discourse of nascent political Islam.[4] Clearly, neither *Misr al-Fatat* nor the MB were viable options of political activism for Egypt's Jews who held radical views and were thus pushed towards Left-wing, anti-fascist politics quickly becoming over-represented in Marxist movements.[5]

Communist sympathisers in Egypt continued to have mainly a bourgeois social background and their commitment initially focused on educational and cultural activities as they founded several circles and magazines to spread their ideas. Nonetheless, particularly since the early 1940s, communist activism spread, although limitedly, also among working class Egyptians who had been previously excluded from non-Arabic speaking circles. The fast development of Egyptian industry during these years came with a decline in living and working conditions for labourers. The communist discourse pointed to the connivance of the Egyptian bourgeoisie with international imperialism in extracting profits from local labour. This allowed to link class struggle to national emancipation, a pattern eventually observed elsewhere in the post-colonial world, thus providing Egyptian communists with nationalist credentials and a larger audience for their positions.[6]

While World War II approached and ultimately reached Egypt in the early 1940s, three new communist organisations saw the light and animated what many regard as the heyday of Egyptian Marxism. Jewish intellectuals and activists of bourgeois origins, some of them holding dual citizenship, were again behind the establishment of these new groups. In 1943 Henri Curiel, son of a rich landowning family, founded the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation (EMNL, in arabic: *al-Haraka al-Misriyya li-l-Taharrur al-Watani)*. Around the same time, Hillel Schwartz created *Iskra* ("The Spark" in Russian) which featured an all-Jewish leadership and focused its activities on advocating Marxist theories among the Egyptian urban intelligentsia. In the early 1940s, a group of three Egyptian Jews, Ahmad Sadiq Saad, Yusuf Darwish and Raymond Duwayk gathered a circle of communist sympathisers around their magazine *al-Fajr al-Jadid* ("The New Dawn"). The group avoided founding a proper communist party and preferred working alongside other groups, particularly the youth based "Wafdist Vanguard", prioritising national liberation. In a positive

development, signalling the growth of the Egyptian communist movement, Curiel's EMNL merged with Iskra in 1947, leading to the creation of the Democratic Movement for National Liberation, better known with its Arabic acronym *Hadetu* (*al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya li-l-Taharrur al-Watani*). In addition, between late 1949 and early 1950, Fouad Mursi created the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP), modelled as a traditional Marxist-Leninist organisation. Mursi had received his political education from French communists in Paris, during his time as a PhD student there. His ECP, unlike Hadetu, did not recommend active cooperation with other nationalist forces seen, particularly the Wafd, as expression of the bourgeoisie which would eventually shift to the reactionary camp once Egypt had achieved the independence.[7]

As both the names of the EMNL and later Hadetu suggest, the communist movement continued to prioritise the national cause. Curiel's personal analysis was crucial in favouring the prominence of national liberation struggle within his parties. His belief was that communists in Egypt should stress on their national identity in order to reach out to the popular masses and this entailed spending efforts to recruit as many (solely) Egyptians as possible. Accordingly, Curiel thought that communist propaganda should focus on nationalist demands, thus emphasising the common ground with other political forces.[8] The nationalist thrust was fundamental in bringing the EMNL and Iskra together while also pushed Egyptian Marxists in general to seek active collaboration with other organisations. Pursuing the line of the "united front", the communists were active in wider fora and umbrella organisations, particularly in the wake of World War II, such as the "National Committee of Workers and Students" or the local branch of the "World Peace Council". In this context, between 1946 and 1952, Egyptian communists collaborated with nationalist groups, first and foremost the Wafdist Vanguard, and the MB. The February and March 1946 strikes and the anti-British agitations in 1950–52 were major occasions in which the "united front" was experimented to a certain degree.[9]

However, the primacy of the national cause and the thrust towards the "Egyptianisation" of the communist movement would also have some controversial consequences, particularly on the long term. As the question of Palestine increasingly occupied the Egyptian political debate in the run up to 1948, the communist movement experienced significant difficulties in addressing the issue. The wide anti-Zionist sentiment in Egyptian politics, the Soviet support to partition and the relations between Jews and other members within the communist movement, particularly Hadetu,

complicated the formulation of a convincing communist position. In fact, many communists had been involved in the previous decade in anti-Zionist activity, especially in the framework of Israel's "Jewish League to Fight Zionism" in which Iskra members played a dominant role. Hadetu did support partition but tried to articulate its position from an anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist position. Reflecting Curiel's thought, Hadetu accepted the USSR position on the creation of a Jewish and Arab States but also saw this step as preliminary to a future single state. The solution to the question of Palestine was in the unification of Jews and Arabs in a common effort to counter and expel British imperialism. This line and the wider communist alignment on Soviet position exposed the movement to the government crackdown which imprisoned communists and suspected Zionists after the declaration of the martial law in 1948. Moreover, the support to the partition plan provoked some discontent within the communist movement itself and the divide between foreign national Jewish and Egyptian leaders started to emerge on this issue. For instance, the first proposal to expel both Curiel and Schwartz from Hadetu were advanced on this occasion.[10] The line on partition and more broadly, Curiel-sponsored Egyptianisation of Hadetu, provided his opponents with major arguments to attack his leadership and the role of Jews within the movement.[11]

The government repression during 1948 did not spare Curiel himself who spent around eighteen months in prison. Upon release in 1950, King Faruq deprived him of the Egyptian nationality and had him deported to Italy from which Curiel reached Paris. In France, alongside other expelled communist activists he established the "Rome Group" and continued to follow and support Hadetu from afar. Meanwhile, Hadetu was recovering and in fact increasing its membership and expanding its outreach. The group continued to be very active in the press, by publishing several magazines, as well as in the organisation of Egyptian labour, contributing to the growth of the trade union movement. The line of the united front kept guiding its action and accordingly, Hadetu, unlike other Marxist organisations, built its presence in the army and established working contacts with the nascent Free Officers Movement (FOM).[12] In fact, besides recruiting members among the ranks of army officers, Hadetu provided significant help to the organisational effort of the FOM. Marxist officers relied on Hadetu's experience to structure the movement while the communist organisation supported the FOM propaganda within the army and in society at large, for instance, by printing FOM leaflets in its secret printing

house. Moreover, Hadetu's views influenced the FOM broad ideological framework whose main goals, from the anti-colonial trope to the adversity to capitalist and feudal productive relations, echoed that of the communist movement.[13]

When the FOM carried out its coup in July 1952, Hadetu although not directly involved, was the only communist organisation that received notice about it. It was also the only organisation that supported the FOM "revolution" wholeheartedly, despite disapproval from the rest of Egyptian communism and the initial Soviet hostility toward the coup. The prioritisation of the national cause was the main element bringing Hadetu and the FOM closer while a certain ideological proximity, particularly in economic orientations, also played a role in fostering such collaboration. However, on the base of such common ground, the communist movement would also experience its own sort of opposition-integration dilemma, as collaboration alternated with repression at the hand of the new ruling power in the following decades.

Enduring Repression, Seeking Collaboration: Egyptian Communism and the Nasserist Regime (1952–1965)

The communists' difficult handling of nationalism and the dilemma of relations with nationalist forces remained central throughout the trajectory of Egypt's second Marxist movement. The collaboration with disparate political parties and movements based on the common national cause questioned the identity of leftist organisations. The potential contradiction between class-based internationalism and the "united front" policy fostered debate on political priorities within Egyptian Marxism. As personal rivalries and ideological disputes plagued Egypt's communists, such political debate often led to fragmentation.[14]

The FOM coup in July 1952 signalled the rise of a new hegemon in Egypt, which would rely on its nationalist, and increasingly pan-Arab, credentials and rhetoric to shape its dominance over Egyptian politics and society. As a result, Egypt's communists had to act against the backdrop of FOM nationalist discourse, and its own formulation of pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism. In Gramscian terms, the FOM not only had political dominance but also enforced its cultural hegemony over the country's politics.[15] Throughout the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, the

Egyptian Left was thus entangled within the dilemma on what position and what discourse to adopt towards the FOM. Over this period, the communist movement oscillated between the thrust to participate in the Nasserist hegemonic bloc and opposition to a repressive rule that did not tolerate any structured competitor.[16] In fact, the lure of participation in Nasser's "revolution" ensued not only from the explicit or de facto communist prioritisation of nationalist discourse and goals. It would also be further strengthened as socialist policies and closer relations with the USSR became defining features of the Nasserist regime.

Despite the common opposition to monarchical rule and the centrality of the anti-British fight, the Egyptian communist movement was split in its appreciation and response to the FOM takeover. Hadetu lent full support to the FOM "revolution" not only because of the operative contacts established between the two organisations prior to the military takeover. Hadetu's leadership believed that its affiliates within the army, some reportedly close to Nasser himself, could influence the FOM and bring it closer to more explicit Marxist positions. Hadetu stood by its position even after the regime harshly cracked down on workers striking at Kafr al-Dawwar, two months only into their rule. The communist organisation appeared to cherry pick the regime's actions to justify its support: while ignoring the repression of the workers' movement, Hadetu expressed its support for the first agrarian reform law issued in September 1952, a measure high in its agenda, which in turn ostensibly proved the regime's sensibility to Marxist demands.[17] Conversely, the ECP, which had no relations with the FOM, did not wait much before criticising the new military rule despite its satisfaction with the deposition of King Faruq. The ECP saw the army as a regressive institution and did not view positively a coup which imposed a new political system from above, without any significant links with the working and peasant masses.[18] Only with the 1953 ban on leftist publications, the prohibition of political parties and the ensuing wave of arrests decided by the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was the communist movement temporarily unified in its opposition to the regime.

Despite the repression, between 1954 and 1956, the communist movement would shift back to support the Nasserist regime and the shift occurred in the framework of shared nationalist and anti-imperialist sensibilities. Hadetu, which in 1955 merged with other smaller groups establishing the Unified Egyptian Communist Party (UECP), would again lead the way in preaching unity with the leading nationalist force. Egypt's

critical view of the US-sponsored Baghdad Pact to contain Soviet influence in the Middle East had renewed the regime's anti-imperialist credentials. However, in 1955, the arms provision deal with Czechoslovakia and Nasser's leading role during the Bandung Afro-Asian conference propelled Egypt as a main force in the global fight against imperialism. Such global reputation would be definitively sanctioned following the 1956 nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the political victory that Egypt achieved in conclusion of the British-French-Israeli tripartite aggression that ensued.[19] In light of these developments, the UECP declared its renewed support for the Nasserist regime, despite the internal authoritarian rule. Anti-imperialism represented the main thrust behind the UECP's willingness to integrate the Egyptian nationalist platform while other historical communist social demands appeared subordinated. The UECP abided by Nasser's nationalist proposal, choosing to play an ancillary role instead of further developing its own anti-imperialist, alternative platform. This was clear in how the UECP, but also other communist organisations, included gradually Mursi's ECP, changed their conception of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Departing from its traditional position concerning Israel, the Egyptian communist movement started to see the Jewish state more and more as a "bridgehead" of Western imperialism in line with Arab nationalist positions. Israel's participation in the tripartite aggression seemed to confirm such status and, consequently, its existence and participation in conflict settlement efforts were increasingly questioned by the communists. In turn, the Egyptian Left appeared receptive of pan-Arab arguments and tropes, particularly those that saw in Arab unity the only way to contrast imperialism and prevail over Israel's aggressive plans.[20]

The success of pan-Arab nationalism in the second half of the 1950s and the anti-imperialist "prestige" that Egypt earned would also spur the communist movement towards further efforts at unification. International communism too started to openly support Egypt in light of Nasser's international orientations and his industrial development plans. In fact, the contribution of foreign communist "advisors", notably the Italian Velio Spano, played a significant role in bringing the Egyptian communist factions together. Thus, unity among the communists' ranks responded to the need to increase the weight of the movement as it sought further integration in the nationalist hegemonic bloc. In this context, since late 1956, the UECP, the ECP and the Workers and Peasant's Communist Party (WPCP), formerly known as Popular Democracy, started to

negotiate the formation of a united communist organisation. During the talks throughout 1957, personal rivalries and different views on the relations with the Nasserist regime risked compromising the unification project: for instance, the UECP's promptness in seeking collaboration with the regime clashed with the ECP's historical wariness towards collaboration with Nasser.[21]

Despite organisational and ideological divergences, the Egyptian communists decided to pursue unification at all costs and welcomed external suggestions to delay the resolution of the most problematic issues at a later stage. As a result, in early 1958, the United Egyptian Communist Party (*al-Muttahid*)[22] was established and released its first communique: the praising references to Egypt's anti-imperialist standing underscored to what extent the national cause was central in realising communist unity. As a further evidence, the communists now called for unity among all of the ranks of Egyptian society, thus expanding the friend camp also to previously hostile class, such as the "national bourgeoisie". National unity had superseded class solidarity and accordingly, al-Muttahid avoided elaborating a coherent position on other pressing issues such as the still unfulfilled creation of parliamentary democracy or the regime's continued repression of the trade union movement.[23]

Although the UECP faction contributed the most to the birth of al-Muttahid on such nationalist terms, the ECP too agreed to put its reserves towards the Nasserist regime aside. Thus, Mursi's party accepted to change its line and join this common effort aimed at participating in the ruling bloc. Moreover, the ECP also demanded the exclusion of Jews, seen as foreigners, from the leading bodies of the new party. Such request, testified to the ECP's subscription to a rather traditional form of nationalism, significantly close to Nasser's own interpretation.[24]

Al-Muttahid was more the result of a mechanic juxtaposition carried out against the backdrop of Nasserist dominance, rather than the fruit of genuine organisational and ideological unification. The unresolved, underlying contradictions would soon emerge to cripple the unitary party, while the junior position in the "national front" with Nasserism would expose the communists to Nasser's hegemonic pursuits nationally and regionally. Communist unity was therefore short-lived and the internal contradictions that produced its disintegration broke out when Nasser furthered its pan-Arab agenda on two major developments: the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) and his competition with the new Iraqi regime led by Abd al-Karim Qasim.

In March 1958, Syria and Egypt announced the merger of the two countries and the creation of the UAR: Nasser was taking the first step in fulfilling the long-term goal of Arab unity, putting aside his hesitancies in order to stand by his role of undisputed leader of Arab nationalism. Syrian Baathist leadership for its part had lobbied hard on Egypt's President to achieve union as Nasser's support would help it bolster its rule vis-à-vis internal competitors, notably Khaled Bakdash's Syrian Communist Party (SCP).[25] After the UAR was born, Nasser wanted to impose single party rule over Syria and Baath challengers were the first to face pressure for dissolution. The Syrian communists tried to resist, even proposed a federated union between Syria and Egypt in order to preserve a multi-party system in their country. Their efforts were to no avail as both Nasser and the Baathists were determined to crack down on the SCP and oust its charismatic leader out of the country. Confronted with the forced dissolution of a sister communist organisation, al-Muttahid saw the rapid resurfacing of divisions along factional lines. The party was established based on its acceptance of the progressive and revolutionary role of pan-Arabism but as the Nasserist regime made its first step towards realising the goal, Syrian communism was the first casualty in the process. Coherently with its historical positions, the Hadetu faction within al-Muttahid glossed over the liquidation of the SCP and while the line of continued support to the regime was initially upheld, the ECP faction did not subscribe to such decision neither light-heartedly nor completely.[26]

The reckoning within al-Muttahid did not come long after this episode. In fact, only few months later, the deposition of the Iraqi monarchy at the initiative of a military-led organisation modelled on the FOM would spark unbridgeable differences within al-Muttahid as well as a new wave of repression over Egyptian communism. With the emergence of a new nationalist republic in Iraq, the UAR sought to expand its project and proposed the new Iraqi leader Qasim to join the union. Unlike in Syria or Egypt, Iraqi communists had closer relations with the nationalist officers and had effectively formed a "national front". Both Qasim and the communists were reluctant to join the Egypt-led UAR and eventually rejected the proposal: the communists wanted to avoid the fate of the SCP, while Qasim knew that joining the UAR meant ceding sovereignty to Nasser's Egypt.[27] Not only Iraq stopped the expansion of Nasser-led UAR, but also came to embody a new model of nationalist and revolutionary Arab republic, one where a front composed of all the progressive forces apparently emerged successfully.

For the ECP faction within al-Muttahid, Iraq was the proof that a more balanced association between nationalist officers and communists was possible. Furthermore, this was also the occasion to settle the underlying divergences with the Hadetu faction: in fact, the ECP had strong connections with Iraqi communists and the latter pressed their Egyptian comrades to ensure al-Muttahid's support. On this occasion, while Hadetu kept defending the Nasserist line over the UAR-Iraq dispute, its position did not make the majority. As a result, the ECP faction expelled former Hadetu members from the Politburo thus sanctioning the de facto end of the unitary party. Al-Muttahid, while still considering collaboration with the regime, continued to voice its support for the Iraqi option, something that Nasser could not tolerate. Thus, the Egyptian President quickly hit the communist movement as a whole and without differentiating among its different trends, of which some kept lending their support to the ruling regime, ordered a massive arrest campaign. Split over their respective interpretations of relations with the nationalist hegemon, the Egyptian Left found itself united under Nasser's repression.[28] In less than two years, Egyptian communism shifted from full alignment with the Nasserist regime to opposition and the ensuing government crackdown. Thus, the short trajectory of al-Muttahid highlighted the link between its own policy fluctuations and the choice of pan-Arabism as the main ideological framework for policy making. However, not only were the communists unable to agree on a common line concerning relations with Nasser. The abandonment of an autonomous elaboration of the "national front" led them to rely on Nasser's own interpretation, which exposed the movement to the President's hegemonic approach to political relations.[29]

The incarceration of virtually all Egyptian communists did not mark the end of relations with the Nasser regime, nor the end of the Left's attempts to integrate the hegemonic bloc. During the first half of the 1960s, both regional and national developments allowed for a renewal of cooperative contacts. In 1961, Syrian resistance to Egyptian dominance led officials from the Syrian army to stage a military coup, instate a civilian government and withdraw Damascus from the UAR. The collapse of the union represented a major setback for Nasser's pan-Arab project and for the credibility of the pan-Arab option, which had already experienced a stop with the UAR-Iraq dispute. The UAR demise hastened Nasser's efforts to bring the Egyptian economy effectively under public control in the framework of a wider socialist turn. Between 1960 and 1964, Egypt nationalised key industrial and banking complexes, launched its first "Five-Year

Plan" for industrial development and adopted a "Chart of National Action" in which socialism was described as an "inevitable solution".[30]

While the Nasser regime kept them jailed, communist activists and intellectuals looked at Egypt's socialist transformation with growing interest and fascination. The policies that the government was implementing appeared to validate the socio-economic and political agenda that the communists had been preaching since independence. Ultimately, Nasser decided to reconcile with the Egyptian Left and in the months leading to the visits of Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1964 ordered the liberation of hundreds of incarcerated communists. The Egyptian President aimed at co-opting notably the Marxist intellectuals by offering them posts in the new "socialist" institutions and the government-controlled press. As a result, several Marxist intellectuals joined the new Nasserist single party, the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) or started working in the official press: in 1965 the magazine *al-Taliʿa* (The Vanguard) was created and became the main outlet hosting the pro-regime Marxist intellectuals.[31]

In this context, Hadetu, but also the more wary ECP, welcomed the offer of collaboration coming from the Nasser regime. The socialist measures and rhetoric embraced by the government led the communists to believe that participating in, if not leading, the revolutionary transformation of the country from within the regime institutions was not only advisable but in fact possible. Based on this rationale, in 1965 both Hadetu and the ECP, alongside some smaller organisations, decided to dissolve themselves and allow its members and cadres to join the ASU which was seen in the communists' eyes, as de facto playing the effective role of the Leninist revolutionary vanguard party.[32] External pression might have influenced such decision but only to a limited extent as building a national front had long been the primary communist goal, not simply Hadetu's. However, Nasser was far from being willing to let the communists play such a role and while he needed their contribution to formulate the new state ideology, he kept looking at them as a potential threat. Consequently, co-optation meant full alignment and thus the communists who accepted posts in the ASU or the press ended up being tasked with the production of regime propaganda. While soon the superficial character of Egypt's socialist transformation emerged clearly, communist intellectuals were not allowed to openly criticise the government action, even when expressed from a position of general support. The Nasser regime did not renounce to coercive measures to ensure loyalty and in 1966 new arrests hit

hundreds of communists, both among those who had joined state institutions and media outlet and those who resisted full alignment.[33]

The 1965 dissolution marked the end of the second Egyptian communist movement and the beginning of a ten-year span before a revival of Marxist activism could be observed well into the Sadat era. The decision to join the ASU underscored again that integration and not opposition remained the communists' favourite option. If it is undoubtedly true that government repression did influence such a position, it is also clear that integration remained a major goal throughout the trajectory of the second communist movement which willingly accepted to play an ancillary role in Egyptian politics in both organisational and cultural terms.

Egyptian Communism and the Palestinian Left in Perspective

The Egyptian communists' conundrum regarding their relations with the FOM and the Nasserist regime was a dynamic showing similarity with other political realities in the region. A political environment shaped by nationalism, anti-imperialism and socialist "revolutionary" trope also characterised the contemporary Palestinian national movement and specifically the PLO. Consequently, despite evident differences, the Egyptian Left's dilemma on active collaboration with a dominant, nationalist actor echoes the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma towards Fatah and the PLO leadership.

The PFLP and the PLO Left were even more embedded into nationalist politics not only as part of a struggling national liberation movement. Their origins lay in the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM), and it is no coincidence that the ANM itself went through a Nasserist phase during the 1950s up to the Arab defeat in the 1967 June War. The ANM shift to the Left was the result of a gradual and contentious process in which both internal calculation and the consequence of external events played a prominent role. Furthermore, the PFLP's adoption of Marxism-Leninism in 1969 was partly dictated by the urgency to respond to the challenge that the DFLP launched "from the Left" while also the need to assert a distinguished identity vis-à-vis Fatah played some role in such shift.[34] For their part, the first and second Egyptian communist movements ended up prioritising the national cause because the struggle for independence against

British imperialism provided the legitimising framework in Egyptian politics both during the liberal age[35] and after Nasser's takeover.

Therefore, the Egyptian and Palestinian Left articulated their political agency against the backdrop of an overarching nationalist discourse that a different and dominant actor defined. For both the Egyptian communists and the PLO Marxist factions, the dilemma was on what terms and timing to integrate the hegemonic bloc. Hence, the policy fluctuations and the intra-leftist political fragmentation that characterised the Palestinian as well as the Egyptian case. Egypt's communist organisations split on the issue of relations with the Nasserist regime on several occasion, notably when the rift between Hadetu and the ECP over the Egyptian-Iraqi dispute led to the end of al-Muttahid in the late 1950s. The PFLP and the DFLP were frequently divided when considering mending relations with the Fatah PLO leadership. This was the case during the post-1982 PLO split or the divisions experienced by the national movement following the Oslo accords. Likewise, policy fluctuations in the Egyptian and Palestinian Left's lines of action appeared when renewed space to integrate the hegemonic bloc emerged. The Egyptian communists' rapprochement with the Nasserist regime in the wake of the Suez War, or after Egypt's socialist turn, despite recent disagreement and government repression as well as the Palestinian Left promptness in integrating the Oslo institutions, underscored the link between integration and policy fluctuation.

As the Egyptian and the Palestinian leftists experienced a similar dilemma, they also deployed similar analyses and practices when facing it. The PFLP and the DFLP frequently and openly resorted to Maoist analytical tools to articulate their positions. Mao's theory on primary and secondary contradictions has been deployed repeatedly by both factions, notably the PFLP, to justify policy shifts.[36] While Maoism had by far a lesser influence on Egyptian communism, and certainly on its major organisations, echoes of the contradictions theory can be found in analyses arguing for support to the Nasserist regime. For instance, according to such logic, the different forces animating the communist movement came to support Nasser between 1955 and 1956 in light of his international orientation and the anti-imperialist character of his foreign policy. The lack of internal pluralism and the continued repression of the workers and communists' movement were considered a secondary contradiction while the formation of a united front became an urgent task to confront the primary contradiction with foreign imperialism.[37] In a further similarity, the Egyptian and PLO Left resorted to coalition politics to increase their

political weight in front of their respective hegemonic counterpart. In both cases, coalescing attempts did not entail a genuine effort to achieve ideological and organisational unification. Therefore, such instrumental juxtapositions of forces were short-lived, dissolved due to personal rivalries and unaddressed fundamental divergences. The PLO Left's experience with "Joint Commands" and "Democratic Alliance" or Egyptian communists' "al-Muttahid" party testified to this dynamic.

Ultimately, the opposition-integration dilemma that the Egyptian and Palestinian Left had to confront underscored their renounce to elaborate a political and cultural alternative to that of the nationalist dominant forces. As Beinin pointed out when addressing the cases of Egyptian and Israeli Marxists, no distinctions emerged between the hegemonic and a counterhegemonic political project and culture that the Left was supposed to elaborate.[38] The account of the opposition-integration dilemma, that the PFLP and the rest of the PLO Left lived, showed the validity of such analysis in relation to the Palestinian case too. As a further evidence, both in Egypt and Palestine, political Islam has been able to produce an alternative, counterhegemonic project, thus filling the vacuum that Marxist forces had left. The MB and Hamas thus attracted the discontents of the dominant political systems, excluded from co-optation and subject to repression. The description of the Egyptian communists' relations with the Nasserist regime showed the recurrence of dilemmas and dynamics observed addressing the PLO Left and the PFLP's case. The renounce and inability to elaborate a viable political alternative emerged as fundamental in both contexts. Elsewhere in the region, the ideological and political trajectory of another leftist movement committed to national liberation underscored the centrality of such point.

The Evolution of the PKK's Radical Alternative, 1970s–2000s

The current PKK's[39] adoption and experimentation of "democratic confederalism" underscores the long distance that the party covered since its Marxist-Leninist beginnings. In fact, its own early elaboration of the argument asserting that Kurdistan had been the subject of Turkish colonialism would provide some bases for its changes in the late 1990s and the 2000s. Nonetheless, it was Abdullah Ocalan's ability to formulate an effective ideological and organisational response to the fateful challenges that the

PKK faced, even before his arrest in 1999, that allowed the party to preserve its relevance. Thanks to its landmark transformations, the PKK continued to embody and popularise a genuinely radical alternative within the Kurdish national movement. Ideological and organisational transformation was not the only factor ensuring the PKK's survival as also its ability to exploit regional developments played a key role. However, the elaboration and re-elaboration of a counterhegemonic political proposal provided the foundations for its renewal.

The PKK stands out among other forces animating the Kurdish national movement not only for its ideological profile, but also for its social origins. Such different founding elements are noteworthy as they provided the party with the intellectual and organisational background to take on needed changes proactively. Unlike most of its predecessors in Turkish Kurdistan and its competitors elsewhere, notably Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK emerged from an urban and proletarian milieu. This allowed the party to distance itself from Kurdish rural, conservative organisations which rested on tribal power structures. During the 1970s, Ocalan and his *Apocular*[40] group were engaged in student politics in Ankara, sympathising and debating with several factions that animated the Turkish radical Left in those years.[41] As a result, Marxist theory informed deeply the group's elaboration of the Kurdish question which in turn responded to the shortcomings of the Turkish radical Left on this issue. Ocalan and his comrades while asserting a distinctive Kurdish national identity did not formulate their discourse on Kurdish national emancipation in ethnic terms. In fact, to them the struggle for Kurdish national liberation was the focal point of a revolutionary process that would also include the Turkish working class in its fight against capitalism and fascism in the country. The Apocular group considered Kurdistan as a Turkish (and international) colony, in which the Kemalist state had intervened to repress the Kurdish national identity, use economic modernisation to break traditional societal organisation and assimilate Kurds in Turkish culture and education. The Turkish radical Left for its part rejected this view in a mechanic application of Marxist analysis: Turkey's key position within the US global power structure during the Cold War meant that the country could not be considered fully independent; hence, it could not lead a colonising endeavour. Consequently, the Turkish radical Left could not conceive Kurdistan and the Kurdish question in colonial terms. Putting class at the centre of their analysis, the leftist factions called for a common struggle between Kurdish and Turkish workers and peasants against the capitalist elites. The Apocular group

reproached their Turkish comrades for what they saw as a "social-chauvinist" denial of the Kurdish question, which reflected to what extent the Kemalist cultural hegemony influenced and defined the political identity and analysis of the Turkish radical Left. Thus, the Apocular group called on Turkish revolutionaries to join their struggle, getting rid of their chauvinism and embracing a true internationalist identity.[42]

The PKK was officially established in 1978 during a founding congress held in the Diyarbakir province, after the group decided to leave Ankara and relocate to Kurdistan. The congress was preceded by the publication of "The Path of Kurdistan Revolution", better known as "Manifesto" in which the PKK illustrated its views on the Kurdish question and its strategy towards liberation. In fact, this first Manifesto was not dissimilar from those of other leftist national liberation movements worldwide. The PKK adopted Marxism-Leninism as the fundamental ideological and organisational principle and the Kurdish question was analysed through the lenses of scientific socialism. Since Kurdistan was considered as an international colony, split among four Middle Eastern countries, liberation equalled to the achievement of a united, independent and democratic Kurdistan, namely a separate and socialist state in the region. Armed struggle was pivotal in the PKK's strategy, not only as a method to pursue its goals, but also as a mean to assert its message in Kurdish society. Thus, the PKK first targeted Kurdish collaborators of the Turkish state during its early armed operations and subsequently waited until 1984 to launch its guerrilla war against its main enemy.[43]

However, during the 1980s, the PKK started to review some of its position, responding pragmatically to the needs and consequences of its military effort and its regional relevance. Following the 1980 coup in Turkey which instated military rule, the party leaders and forces relocated to Syria and the Beqaa Valley while Iraqi Kurdistan became a launchpad for trans-border operations. Therefore, the PKK adapted its rhetoric to avoid divergences with regional partners, gradually dropping its calls for an independent, united and democratic Kurdistan and insisting instead on a "free Kurdistan". Accordingly, the PKK affirmed its will to respect the positions of other trends within the Kurdish national movement as well as started to speak of solutions within the existing boundaries of Middle Eastern states.[44]

Alongside these adjustments prompted by diplomatic concerns, Ocalan worked on a new interpretation of the PKK's socialism which would eventually be emphasised following the demise of the USSR. His thought

became the sole ideological reference for the PKK which trained new recruits on the bases of his analyses. This, coupled with the repression of internal dissent on both ideological and organisational matters, ensured alignment among officials and rank-and-file alike.[45] While the realisation of a socialist society remained an overall goal of the PKK's revolution, Ocalan shifted his attention on an individual level, persuaded that socialist transformation should involve the single militants and their personality. The Kurdish revolution was tasked with the creation of a "New Man" capable of comprehending socialism on a spiritual level and consequently changing the bases of socialisation with other individuals. Such transformation was the response to the alienation to which Kurds were subjected in Turkish society as a result of capitalist social relations and colonial assimilation. Ocalan gradually abandoned classical Marxist terminology and concepts, stressing his view of the PKK's efforts as aimed at "humanisation" or "human emancipation" from a society enslaving individuals through oppressive societal structures.[46]

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Ocalan based his critique of "real socialism" on his theory of the New Man. The PKK leader affirmed that the USSR had failed to bring socialist transformation to an individual level, therefore, while society was organised along socialist lines, it also produced both individuals with "capitalist longings" and privileged groups built on state bureaucracy. The end of the Soviet Union had in fact freed socialism from the deviated realisation observed throughout eastern Europe. This focus on individual transformation not only informed the PKK's view of post-Soviet socialism, but also enabled the party to overcome the national liberation paradigm. The "re-humanisation" process at the centre of Ocalan's thought transcended the immediate Kurdish national dimension of the PKK's fight and lent it a potentially universal significance. The Soviet realisation of socialism within national borders was regarded as "childish" and "primitive", while the PKK pursued a "human socialism" that went beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Ocalan's theoretical elaborations appeared relevant on both an individual-micro and a human-macro level, in a dynamic that strengthened the overall cohesion of his thought.[47] Indeed, such dimensional shifts emerged also in later re-elaborations of the PKK's ideological bases that Ocalan produced in the 2000s.

In 1999, the Turkish secret services, assisted by other international security agencies, arrested Abdullah Ocalan in Kenya, the last stop-over of his wandering that followed the expulsion of the PKK from Syria due to

Ankara intensified pressure on Damascus.[48] The incarceration of the PKK's "sun", as he is usually referred to by militants, represented a shock and a watershed in the history of the party. Consequently, the PKK underwent a major restructuring of its ideology and organisational structure during the 2000s that, despite the magnitude of the challenge, ensured its survival and regional relevance as well as preserved Ocalan's centrality as doctrinal reference.

The defence texts that Ocalan produced for submission to the Turkish and international courts in charge of his case provided the bases for the ideological and programmatic changes that the PKK adopted in the first half of the 2000s. A first body of texts was subsequently gathered in the "Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question" which was later raised to the status of PKK's "second manifesto". In this declaration, Ocalan was concerned with demonstrating that the PKK pursued the realisation of a "Democratic Republic" within Turkey's national boundaries, not a separate state. According to its leader, the PKK had to become a democratic organisation, seeking the solution to the Kurdish question by means of a democratic dialectic between the Turkish and Kurdish components of the republic. By the same token, following up on the critique of Soviet socialism, Ocalan confirmed its adherence to an ultimate socialist transformation of the democratic republic. However, such socialist transformation was seen as the final result of the PKK's struggle to democratise the Republic not as the outcome of revolutionary armed struggle and seizure of power.[49] The Kurdish participation to the Republic's democratic life was now possible, thanks to the fight, including by military means, that the PKK led since 1984. Echoing the theories on the creation of a "New Man", Ocalan stated that the PKK's revolutionary path had stopped colonial assimilation of Kurds to a great extent and that tribal social structures within Kurdish society had been eliminated. The undeniability of Kurdish national identity was the fruit of a fifteen-year long battle that now allowed the Kurdish national movement to pursue its goals through democratic participation in Turkish politics.[50]

In the following defence texts and their subsequent revisions, Ocalan attacked the idea of state, and its different historical embodiments, as oppressive and alienating. In this process, the PKK's leader wanted to shift the focus of the Kurdish national movement away from the goal of national statehood towards that of societal democratisation. According to this view, democratising the Republic meant fighting for a polity which does not rest on nationalist and ethnic identity but in which individual citizenship is the

founding principle. This idea further strengthened the possibility of solving the Kurdish question within the framework of existing countries but at the same time did not exclude supra-state political projects.

After his conviction to a life sentence, Ocalan further elaborated his ideas on citizenship democratisation and rejection of the nation-state, formulating the concept of "democratic confederalism".[51] The PKK's leader found inspiration in the writings of US anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin who identified municipal councils as the founding entity of a stateless society.[52] Building on this principle, Ocalan envisioned the creation of local councils, from municipal councils to regional parliaments, which would represent the core institutions allowing self-administration at a local level. Such entities, responsible for the political and economic administration of their community, could join fellow municipalities in a confederation. This system thus envisages a bottom-up process of political federation that rejects a hierarchical structure of relations in opposition to the centralising trend typical of nation-states, the fundamental political expression within a capitalist order. Democratic confederalism thus provides a model of political organisation that can be implemented both below and beyond the level of states. Accordingly, Ocalan came to believe that such political-institutional configuration was well-suited for the Kurds, which could experiment confederalism at the local level while connecting their communities across the borders that divide Kurdistan.[53]

Between Ocalan's arrest and 2005, the ideological revision was accompanied by a wide organisational restructuring that marked the abandonment of the Marxist-Leninist model and decentralised the PKK decision-making process. Also due to the expansion to sister organisations in other parts of Kurdistan, as Akkaya and Jorgenden have suggested, the PKK became the label to describe a wider movement which included affiliated parties and their specific institutions. The two authors have described the PKK as a "solar system": Ocalan is the central star, providing ideological reference and strategic leadership, and the different affiliated parties and associations in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria but also Europe revolve around him but act on the bases of their own institutions. The new party structure allowed Ocalan to retain his leadership behind bars through the provision of long-term vision, while enabling the PKK to function more independently.[54]

Through such global revision of the principles and structures underpinning its political activity, the PKK retained a radical message of societal transformation which also saw significant practical experimentations. But

more importantly, the development and implementation of democratic confederalism emerged as an original political counterproposal that challenged the models put forward by other trends within the Kurdish national movement which also enjoyed wider international support. In particular, the PKK's "stateless" model challenged the ostensible primacy of the state-building project that the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have been pursuing since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The ample and growing autonomy that the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) gained came to represent a viable and successful solution for the Kurdish question. Nonetheless, the PKK emerged as bearer of a political project that rejected state-building and separatist plans, thus countering the hegemony of the KRG. Its counterhegemonic political proposal enabled the PKK to maintain mobilisation among its popular base and undertake different avenues in its way towards democratisation.[55] This has been the case in Turkey where Kurdish legal parties close to the PKK entrenched their presence in the south eastern parts of the country and increased their political weight nationally. At the same time, the PKK Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), filled the vacuum left by the Assad regime in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) in 2012 and experimented Kurdish self-rule based on democratic confederalism on a larger scale.[56] As these experiences demonstrate, the PKK's ideological and organisational evolution, constantly based on the pursuit of a radical project, enabled the party to maintain its relevance. External factors too had an influence on the PKK's trajectory, but the elaboration of a counterhegemonic discourse and practice allowed the party to address challenges and opportunities on its own terms.

Political Renewal and Its Dilemmas: Marxism, National Liberation and Personal Leadership in the PKK and the PFLP

Several fundamental traits associate the PKK and the PFLP in their ideologies, discourses, structures and goals. Both Marxist-Leninist, the two organisations have articulated their national liberation struggle in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist terms and have relied on the unmatched charisma of their founding leader. The PKK and the PFLP saw their struggle not only through the perspective of national emancipation and self-determination but also as revolutionary processes aiming at the

establishment of an equal, socialist society. In addition, while engaged in armed struggle against state power, both the PKK and the PFLP acted within fragmented and highly competitive national movements, thus being exposed to external influences. Such shared aspects led them to face similar challenges, such as the "loss" of the founding leader, the global crisis of socialism or the defeat of their agenda.

The two leftist organisations are separated by their respective relevance as the PKK and its affiliates remain important actors in Turkish and regional politics and conflicts, while the PFLP only retains very marginal leverage within the Palestinian national movement. Different external factors affecting the Kurdish and Palestinian national movements did play significant roles in producing such an outcome. Kurds, despite discriminations from central governments, enjoy citizenship rights that Palestinians never had in any country but Jordan, and the PKK has been faced with an enemy aiming at military and political victory but also seeking the assimilation not the expulsion of the minority ethnic group. Conversely, the PFLP, and the whole Palestinian national movement, confronted a settler-colonial project based on ethnic exclusivity. Notwithstanding the impact of external environments, the key factors determining such different trajectories relate to the ability, or inability, to formulate a genuine and viable response to emerging challenges. In other words, the elaboration of an autonomous, counterhegemonic political initiative is what enabled the PKK to preserve its relevance in contrast with the PFLP's lack of renewal on such terms.

The PKK and PFLP's ideological origins, and their different paths towards Marxism, hold important indications about their respective future attitudes on doctrinal and organisation renewal. The founding members of the PKK came of age politically within the framework of radical Marxist politics, as several revolutionary movements thrived during the liberal decade following the 1961 coup in Turkey.[57] On the contrary, George Habash and his comrades started their political activism imbued with Constantin Zureiq's preaching on Arab nationalism to whom Habash referred as the "spiritual father" of the ANM. When the movement was born in the early 1950s, its founding members considered a "dialectical" relation mainly with other Arab nationalist organisations, first and foremost the Baath party, while could not approach Arab communists due to their acceptance of the UN Palestine partition plan.[58]

The Arab nationalist paradigm remained unquestioned for the PFLP and the rest of the PLO Left. The ANM shift towards Marxism,

culminating with the PFLP's adoption of Marxism-Leninism in 1969, was gradual and owed much to the need to distinguish the movement from both Fatah and its main leftist competitor, the DFLP. While the Hawatmeh-led split ostensibly occurred contesting Habash's "rightist" leadership, the DFLP too never emancipated itself from Arab and Palestinian nationalism as defining principles. As a result, the PFLP and the Palestinian Left, unlike the PKK, were never able to formulate a fully Marxist case for national liberation beyond the terms dictated by traditional nationalism.[59] Even in its early years, the PKK considered socialist transformation on an individual, national and internationalist level. This enabled the party to emancipate itself from statehood as the only possible outcome for national self-determination and to reduce the centrality of ethnic identity. Therefore, thanks to its primarily Marxist origins, the PKK possessed and mastered the needed theoretical tools to shift from the creation of a separate Kurdish state as ultimate objective, while still proposing a credible and radical project. While both the PKK and the PFLP were faced with the de facto unviability of Kurdish and Palestinian statehood, the PKK's evolution towards "stateless" national emancipation was fundamental to its survival.

The PKK's birth within a context dominated by Marxism was not the only reason behind its greater ideological elaboration. Ocalan had a decisive role in lending his party a sophisticated and evolving doctrinal apparatus while Habash, nor any other of the PFLP leaders provided their organisation with comparable theoretical contributions. "Al-Hakim" and "Apo" shared impressive oratorial skills and unmatched charisma which were crucial in attracting active membership and support around their respective organisations. Nonetheless, not only Habash started his political journey from the right side of the political spectrum, but also did not stand out for the originality of his ideas which were drawn from different sources throughout the different phases of the ANM and the PFLP.[60] Ocalan's thought did not draw from a wide range of references either both during the PKK's early years and in more recent times. In fact, the PKK's texts initially were based on those Marxist sources that inspired the PFLP too, ranging from Lenin to Mao, from Che Guevara to General Giap.[61] Ocalan gradually became the sole ideological reference for the PKK, but nonetheless succeeded in shaping and adapting his discourse in order to provide a convincing long-term vision for the party's action. Thus, when classic Marxist-Leninist analysis showed its shortcomings in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ocalan stressed on the individual importance of socialist

transformation and produced a coherent critique of Soviet socialism. Likewise, out of the need of overcoming Kurdish separatism and statehood, the PKK's head moved towards an anarchist or libertarian interpretation of Kurdish self-determination. Even in the elaboration of democratic confederalism, Ocalan did not rely on a thorough theoretical background nor provided a particularly deep treatment of the authors that inspired him.[62] However, he succeeded in identifying a convincing way forward for the PKK, winning the "hearts and minds" of its popular base and asserting the party's position within the intra-Kurdish competition on political models. To this end, Ocalan's innovative analysis on the role of women in the revolutionary process had a key role. The "substitution" of the proletariat with women as main revolutionary agents and the feminine reinterpretation of Kurdish national mythology represent founding elements of the PKK counterhegemonic discourse.[63] Similarly, the PKK's rhetoric on environmental protection as a battlefield against extractive capitalism further strengthened the case for the implementation of democratic confederalism.

Against this backdrop, although Ocalan's arrest initially appeared to jeopardise the PKK's survival, it ultimately gave the party a chance to pursue real restructuring and emancipate itself from the original Stalinist organisational model. Even behind bars, Ocalan's charisma retained a crucial role in attracting and mobilising the PKK's recruits, but he started exerting his leadership as a strategic ideologue, informing the PKK's underlying philosophy. The Stalinist interpretation of democratic centralism continue to dominate the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's decision-making to this day. The geographical fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement has entailed the emergence of differences and divisions even within single organisations. Nonetheless, nor the PFLP, nor other factions, ever undertook major structural revisions, and while the DFLP officially abandoned Marxism-Leninism, the whole Palestinian Left never experimented new fundamental configurations. The PFLP and DFLP's involvement in the PLO state-building project, and the bureaucratisation of political activity that ensued, discouraged organisational change and leadership renewal.[64] In this framework, the PFLP essentially froze its ideological elaboration to its early years, justifying the shifts on major issues, from peace negotiations to Palestinian statehood, as matters of tactical concern. Habash, also due to his health problems dating back to the 1980 stroke, could never interpret his leadership as Ocalan did. Therefore, "objective" and "subjective" factors prevented organisational

and ideological renewal in the PFLP, as the lack of a real assessment of the Soviet demise exemplified. In contrast to the PKK, but also to other experiences worldwide, notably in South America,[65] the PFLP did not find a definition of socialism that could be effective in a post-Soviet world while also fitting the Palestinian scenario.

The PKK and the PFLP's respective relations with the concept and practice of armed struggle reflect their different ideological elaboration and evolution as well as further underscore the PFLP's limits. The post-colonial and anti-imperialist thinkers and leaders that became popular during the golden age of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s had great influence on both the PKK and the PFLP. Their adoption of guerrilla warfare as an effective military strategy and as a mean of revolutionary transformation was based on the writings and practices of Ernesto Che Guevara, Vo Nguyen Giap and Frantz Fanon. The PFLP saw armed struggle as a catalyst for the spread of Marxism, but the purely military dimension acquired a greater importance due to the strict relation between political legitimisation and military effectiveness in the post-1967 Palestinian national movement. The fundamental PFLP's text illustrating its military strategy delved for many pages into the military rationale for waging guerrilla warfare against Israel.[66] While the PKK included similar considerations in its adoption of armed struggle, the party lent more importance to the political, transformative effect of revolutionary violence on those who waged it. The PKK looked at armed struggle through Fanon's perspective and arguments rather than those of third world guerrilla leaders. The military endeavour was pivotal in forging a new Kurdish personality after decades of colonial oppression and cultural assimilation that led the Kurds in Turkey to a condition of alienation from their own identity and political agency.[67] The absorption of such perspective, eventually allowed the PKK to emancipate itself from this classic post-colonial argument and frame armed struggle according to its new priorities. In the years following his arrest, Ocalan could affirm that the PKK's revolutionary war had achieved its goal of contrasting Kurdish alienation, restoring the Kurds' ability to join Turkish politics on the bases of a genuine cultural and political identity. Consequently, since the early 2000s the PKK's military branches are conceived as apparatuses ensuring the self-defence of the political forces experimenting democratic confederalism. Self-defence is a necessity not only due to the conflictual contexts in which the PKK and its affiliates operated, but it is also a response to the fundamental structures of the nation-state which the party rejects. "The nation-state is a militarily

structured entity" and "the civil leadership of the state is only an accessory of the military apparatus" thus, "this militarisation can only be pushed back with the help of the right to self-defence".[68]

The political and cultural milieus distinguishing their formative period and the peculiarities of their respective leadership represented central aspects in shaping the PKK and the PFLP's agency in front of major challenges. The PKK emerged and asserted itself as a modernising actor within the traditionally tribal-based Kurdish national movement across the region: Ocalan's party elaborated a new legitimising mechanism and formulated an innovative discourse to frame the Kurds' struggle for self-determination. Habash and comrades, after playing a similar role in founding the most widespread (and transnational) Arab nationalist organisation, established the PFLP to respond to the new dominating paradigm in the Arab struggle for Palestine: Fatah's guerrilla warfare and its Palestinian nationalism as an alternative to the failing initiative of Arab states. This does not imply that the PFLP never introduced important innovations in the political practice and discourse of the new Palestinian national movement. Nonetheless, the PFLP never managed to dictate its vision to the rest of the movement nor mobilised sufficient popular support to make its agenda a real counterhegemonic alternative to Fatah. This aspect was highlighted when the PLO leadership changed the paradigm of its political agency tying its legitimacy to the Oslo-based, neoliberal, state-building project. Hamas' Islamist alternative then emerged as its main alternative, attracting mass support and leaving the leftist opposition marginalised. After emerging as a modernising actor, the PKK continued to innovate its political project in response to external shocks and competitors. Evolution and change did not deprive the party of its radical message and of its revolutionary horizons, ensuring political credibility and international mass support.

Conclusions

Leftist trajectories within the Egyptian, Kurdish and Palestinian national movements underscored the pivotal importance of a genuine and autonomous political platform. In the context of such multifaceted fronts aiming at national emancipation and self-determination, Marxist organisations faced the dilemma of prioritising the national cause without ceding to the interpretation that nationalist forces espoused. After all, finding a balance

between class and nation has always been one of the most debated issues within international Marxism.

The Egyptian communist movement never found such balance despite the crucial role played by foreigners and Egyptian Jews in its birth and evolution. The fulfilment of Egyptian national aspirations, hindered by the intervention of British imperialism, was consistently considered as the most urgent political goal for Egypt's communists. Indeed, nationalism was the defining political discourse that regulated Egyptian politics, both before and after, the Nasserist coup and its anti-imperialist successes. As a consequence, notwithstanding its great internal fragmentation, Egyptian communism strived to realise Curiel's "united front" throughout more than two decades. However, Egyptian communists never exerted a dominant influence over the orientations or the fundamental ideological tenets of such national united front. The communists thus ended up being a junior party, exposed to the hegemonic agency of the dominant nationalist actor, particularly after such actor took over the rein of state power. The acceptance of the Nasserist interpretation of the national cause meant that the communists renounced to elaborate their own revolutionary, alternative project, forcing them to a trajectory which only envisaged cooperation on the regime's terms or repression. This produced major inconsistencies in the communists' political agency as repression, authoritarianism and crackdowns on labour were rapidly swept aside when possibilities for integrating the ruling bloc surfaced. Such line of conduct, echoing the PFLP's relations with the PLO Fatah leadership, caused major contradictions in the communists' course of action, shifting between opposition and collaboration with the Nasserist regime, which ultimately undermined the credibility of their political proposal. Similar to the Palestinian case, it was political Islam that eventually came to embody the counterhegemonic challenger to the dominant, nationalist actor, superseding the role of the Egyptian Left.

The evolution of the PKK's trajectory in the Kurdish national movement further confirmed the significance of an original leftist formulation of national liberation. When observing the Egyptian, Kurdish and Palestinian cases, the "imprinting" of founding political environments cannot be understated. The PKK's birth as part of Turkey's urban, radical Left, enabled its first members, and notably its founding father Abdullah Ocalan, to elaborate a fitting Marxist argument for Kurdish national emancipation. Nationalism was not its political cradle and, notwithstanding major ideological and organisational changes, the PKK never

renounced to its own radical interpretation of the struggle for Kurdish self-determination. Ocalan's own contribution to this outcome should be highlighted, particularly if compared to the role of Palestinian and Egyptian leaders. The lack of an original Marxist project within the PLO owes much to the little efforts that PFLP and DFLP's leaders spent in that sense, notably Habash. Within Egyptian communism, the example of Curiel's insistence on theorising and practising the prominence of the national cause, or the subsequent efforts by communist intellectuals to conceal Nasser's policies with Marxist analysis, underscored communist subalternity to Nasserist nationalism. For the PKK, Kurdish nationalism and Marxist-Leninist structure and decision-making were the vehicle for individual and societal revolutionary transformation. Emancipated from nationalist state-building, the PKK could successfully undertake fundamental renewal with the adoption of democratic confederalism and the decentralisation of its organisational structure. While at first glance, such changes appeared as a departure from its origins, in fact the PKK found a new formulation for its original project of societal transformation. When faced with major challenges and threats, the PKK escaped total defeat and decline reaffirming its counterhegemonic political platform, an endeavour that the PFLP, the PLO Left and Egyptian communists were unable to realise, thus contributing to their own marginalisation.

Notes

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

The Dilemmas of a Loyal Opposition and the Unattainable Alternative

In early January 2019, the Palestinian Left in the OPT announced the establishment of the "Democratic Gathering" (DG) in what appeared as yet another attempt of coalition building among left-wing organisations. The PFLP and the DFLP alongside the PPP, Barghouti's PNI and Fida came together to provide a third "popular option" in the currently polarised Palestinian political camp. Once again, the main stated goal was to work towards the "restoration of Palestinian unity", namely to put an end to the Hamas-Fatah division: the DG thus declared its readiness to "talk to all Palestinians cherishing this goal". Familiar rhetorical formulas were re-enacted, such as calls to disengage from the Oslo framework and "protect the PLO". However, in July an opinion piece published on the PFLP's website titled "The Palestinian Democratic Gathering: Flowers without Fruits", hinted to the lack of progress in the development of this new leftist umbrella. The PFLP specifically criticised the PPP and Fida for their choice to join the new PNA government and saw this step as proof of their unwillingness to commit to the construction of a mass base for the DG. Apparently widening the scope of its criticism to the whole DG, the article denounced the short sightedness of its leadership and the fatal limits of its action. To create a viable "national democratic pole", the Left cannot limit itself to the establishment of a new Ramallah-based entity, without reaching out to other areas of the OPT and the diaspora. Such

F. S. Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4339-5_8

pole should have leaders keen on encouraging popular participation in the formulation of a political agenda addressing the most urgent social, economic and political issues. Short of doing this, unity and hence, relevance, remained wishful thinking as this new attempt added to decades of failed coalitions.[1]

The article underscored the unresolved problem of a Palestinian Left unable to embody an alternative to the two governing entities in the OPT, Hamas in Gaza and the PNA in the West Bank. Against the backdrop of Hamas and the PNA failure to achieve minimum goals for Palestinian liberation and self-determination, the absence of a credible leftist option emerges as a fundamental factor in the prolonged crisis of legitimacy and representation affecting the Palestinian national movement. The current condition of the Palestinian Left and specifically of its main faction, the PFLP, is the result of a historical process that started following the 1982 PLO expulsion from Beirut and produced the irreversible irrelevance experienced since the 2007 division.

The significance of the PFLP's decline to the wider condition of the Palestinian national movement required focusing on the PFLP's political agency in order to investigate the Front's own response (subjective factors) to the major challenges (objective factors) that emerged during the period under scrutiny. The specific attention on subjective factors entailed a problematisation of the PFLP's marginalisation process which outlined the interconnections among multiple elements rather than relying on causal explanations according to which decline was the mere result of objective factors. This ultimately allowed a more comprehensive understanding of the PFLP's political trajectory in which common views were reassessed and challenged.

Throughout the twenty-five-year period covered, a fundamental tension or dilemma affected the PFLP's political agency. Such dilemma derived from its contradictory position of loyal adherence to the PLO as main and unquestioned institutional framework while also claiming to represent a radical alternative to the Fatah leadership controlling the PLO. As the boundaries between the PNA and the PLO appeared increasingly blurred after the 1993 Oslo accords, such a tension remained in place. The PFLP rejected the process that established the PNA, but nonetheless maintained its association with its ruling party Fatah and did not disengage from a PLO de facto deprived of its authority by the PNA. This underlying tension influencing the PFLP's agency can be described as an opposition-integration dilemma, since the PFLP tried to balance its

opposition role with its interest in remaining integrated within official Palestinian institutions. The whole PLO leftist opposition had to reckon with such dilemma, but being the main Marxist rival of Fatah, its influence was greater on the PFLP. Although this tension had always marked the PFLP's actions since it joined the PLO, the changed paradigms of Palestinian politics in the post-Beirut phase (due to the virtual end of the PFLP's military potential, the loss of material and popular support enjoyed in Lebanon, its leadership's relocation to Damascus and Arafat's centralisation of decision-making) worsened its effects. Before the fall of the Lebanese sanctuary, the PFLP performed its revolutionary task by participating in the civil conflict within the "anti-confessional" front, while also protecting the Palestinian revolution from national and regional "reactionary" forces. The unmaking of this status-quo with the abrupt end of the Palestinian state-in-exile in Lebanon imposed to the PFLP the question of how to embody a revolutionary alternative within a new and highly precarious political environment.

Following its outbreak after 1982, the opposition-integration dilemma produced in the PFLP a negative policy pattern which was further emphasised as the underlaying dilemma interacted with other sources of pressure influencing the PFLP. The PFLP's attempts to balance these two contrasting thrusts ultimately resulted in a pattern of policy fluctuation. In other words, the PFLP's political line in the attempt to respond to both its oppositional agenda and its priority of integration within the Palestinian political system fluctuated, consequently undermining the effectiveness of its agency and of its political credibility. While policy fluctuation stemmed mainly from the opposition-integration dilemma, other contradictions or sources of pressure accentuated this pattern. In effect, the PFLP's agency fluctuated due to a number of contrasting factors: rejection of political settlement and the primacy of diplomatic strategies, protection of Palestinian political autonomy and regional allies' hegemonic agendas, friction between the exiled PFLP leadership and its activist base in the OPT, and factional calculation and coalition politics were among the main contradictions that the PFLP faced continuously since leaving Beirut.

The pattern of policy fluctuation and the underlying opposition-integration dilemma consistently undermined the PFLP's position as radical option within the Palestinian national movement. Notwithstanding the evolving political scenarios in which the PFLP acted between 1982 and 2007, inconsistencies in policy production continued to compromise the PFLP's attempt to retain or regain its political weight. Therefore, the

resurfacing of the policy fluctuation pattern over time points to the centrality of this dynamic among the factors behind the PFLP's decline. More precisely, while negative external developments represented objective blows to the PFLP's position within the national movement, policy fluctuation exacerbated the consequences of these negative events, as well as preventing the PFLP from benefitting from advantages and opportunities which arose.

The focus on the PFLP's political agency led also to a more precise understanding of the role of ideological doctrine, challenging the widespread conception that the PFLP's inflexible adherence to Marxist-Leninist and Maoist principles represented a cause per se of its decline. In fact, the PFLP leadership resorted to the organisational models derived from Lenin or the analytical and rhetorical tools drawn from Mao to maintain control over the Front and to justify the frequent shifts of its political line. Democratic centralism was used to preserve the exiled leadership's grip on the PFLP, particularly when the inside-outside divide emerged prominently, while, for instance, Mao's concept of primary and secondary contradictions was invoked frequently to support the resumption of coordination with Fatah after a phase of dispute. Contrary to ideas suggesting an overall intransigence, the PFLP's use of its theoretical tools highlighted a certain pragmatism, as ideology served its political shifts. Such application of Marxist ideological and organisational principle however contributed to neutralising a radical renewal of the PFLP's political proposal, thus favouring its overall decline. Furthermore, due to the frequent policy shifts, the way the PFLP resorted to its doctrinal tenets underlined the pervasiveness of the policy fluctuation pattern.

The persistence of the opposition-integration dilemma and the consequent fluctuations questioned the very role of the PFLP within the Palestinian national movement. The PFLP's re-emerging inability to both influence the Palestinian political mainstream and to embody an effective opposition raises serious doubts about the possibility of a revival of the Palestinian Left within the context of its historical factions. This assessment about the condition of the Palestinian Left is even reinforced when considered alongside the trajectories of other leftist and radical organisations in the region. As the cases of the Egyptian communist movement and the PKK demonstrated, contradictions and fluctuations arise when the Left, acting within a national liberation movement, does not participate in the definition of the discourse underpinning political action. In the bid for political and cultural hegemony, elaborating and renewing a political

project countering the nationalist option are crucial to avoid being supplanted and marginalised. Lacking a genuine political alternative, loyalty and cooperation within a common national framework risk proving to be liabilities rather than assets.

Different Phases, Constant Fluctuations

The resurfacing of the opposition-integration dilemma, its interconnection with other sources of tensions, as well as the persistence of the policy fluctuation pattern underscored their centrality in understanding the PFLP's decline. According to each phase the dominant opposition-integration dilemma combined with specific tensions, ensuring the reproduction of policy fluctuations. Such link between fundamental contradictions and peculiar tensions in the production of a fluctuating conduct underscored the PFLP's underlying problem with the elaboration of an effective political counterproposal to Fatah's hegemony.

In the wake of the 1982 PLO evacuation from Lebanon, the PFLP's efforts to create a "radical alternative" to Arafat's diplomatic strategy failed to harmonise the tensions stemming from major divergences with its political partners. Its pursuit of a hard line towards the PLO Chairman played a central role in compromising its coalition with the DFLP and PCP. Conversely, the PFLP's commitment to Palestinian political independence rendered collaboration with the Syrian regime unviable, due to Damascus' hegemonic projects on the PLO. In this context, the PFLP's line fluctuated between its opposition priorities, pushing it closer to Syria and its Palestinian proxies, and its concern for integration that entailed a de facto acceptance of Arafat's line. Moreover, such an alternative could not find the necessary international scope in the Soviet Union, either during post-Brezhnev inaction or under Gorbachev's new course. Ultimately, the failure of the PFLP's agenda in this period, due to its oscillations between multiple sources of tensions, contributed to strengthening Arafat's grip on the PLO.

Afterwards, the PFLP's conduct during the First Intifada revealed on the one hand a certain pragmatism and the ability to adapt its political line to the priorities of the national movement in the OPT. On the other, it showed the re-emergence of the opposition-integration dilemma and its intersection with newly appeared dynamics such as the inside-outside divide or the rise to prominence of political Islam. In this context, policy fluctuation resurfaced first in the formulation of an unclear opposition line

towards Fatah's indirect dialogue with the United States. While criticising the PLO Chairman's diplomatic orientations, the PFLP leadership was unable and unwilling to disengage from the PLO to build a genuine alternative to Fatah's agenda. Significantly, the exiled leadership's reluctance to validate the more radical line of the PFLP cadres in the OPT favoured the loyal opposition line, which in turn undermined the actual chances of restraining Arafat. Integration within the PLO framework, and the ensuing institutional relevance, prevailed over grassroots mobilisation, compromising the positive developments that the First Intifada brought about. Furthermore, the PFLP also displayed an uncertain line towards the rising Islamist factions, notably Hamas. Initial rejection was followed by attempts at coordination that reflected the PFLP's attempt to bring the Islamists into the PLO fold where they could help to counterbalance Fatah's primacy. Ultimately, the rise of Hamas to the role of new radical opposition underscored the PFLP's predicament. The effectiveness of its role of loyal opposition within the PLO was questioned as a new radical actor directly challenged the PLO diplomatic strategy from outside its framework.

During the 1990s, the persistence of fundamental contradictions in the PFLP's policy production combined with the unprecedented challenges that emerged during the first half of this decade. In its response to the crisis of global Marxism, the PFLP leadership displayed a conservative approach in which adherence to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism and a lack of organisational renewal stemmed from the continued grip on the PFLP of a bureaucratised leadership. Self-conservatism also influenced the PFLP's response to the 1993 Oslo accords as integration into the PLO framework compromised its efforts to counter the peace process. Notwithstanding its calls for the establishment of a broad front against Oslo, grassroots mobilisation and revival of national institutions, the PFLP's agency reflected the prioritisation of institutional politics and factional calculation over coalition building, elitist political manoeuvring and a growing integration into the system the PFLP claimed to oppose. These dynamics appeared clear in the dispute with its Islamist partners within the Alliance of Palestinian forces, in the divergences with its OPT cadres, and in the individual reintegration into the post-Oslo system that the PFLP and the DFLP sought after the failure of the Unified Leadership. Abu Ali Mustafa's return to the OPT in 1999 after a three-year-long dialogue with Fatah and the PNA signalled both the continued primacy of integration over opposition as well as a major shift in the PFLP's policy orientations.

Equally significant in reflecting its contradictory policy production was the PFLP's prioritisation of the struggle to "democratise" the OPT political space, including the PNA. A growing number of PFLP cadres and other leftist activists committed to civil society politics, namely joined the mushrooming NGO sector as the new bulwark of the Palestinian national movement and counterweight to the PNA. However, in doing so they fostered a network of organisations deeply dependent on the post-Oslo economic and political system: in other words, the leftist opposition was reorganised within the framework of the internationally sponsored and neoliberal PNA state-building project. Consequently, while the PFLP was caught in the middle of such contradictions and policy shifts, the PNA successfully established its rule over the OPT and Hamas rose to prominence as the only alternative to the hegemonic, but increasingly compromised, PLO/PNA camp with which the PFLP was also ultimately associated.

With the outbreak in September 2000 of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, once again the peculiar dynamics of this new phase emphasised the PFLP's long-standing problems. Harsh Israeli repression, the militarisation of the uprising, the lack of a coordinated Palestinian action and the increasing polarisation between Hamas and the Fatah/PNA camp strengthened the PFLP's fluctuations on different levels. Militarily, while the PFLP invoked collective, coordinated action and condemned the individualistic turn in Palestinian military resistance, retaliatory patterns of action and competition for popularity among the Palestinian factions seemed to dominate PFLP practice. On the political level, the confrontation between the PNA/Fatah and Hamas drove the PFLP to play the role of mediator. Consequently, the PFLP oscillated between Hamas' insistence on armed resistance and rejection of all reformulated settlement projects and Fatah's calls to reform the PNA and restart the peace process. Such fluctuations signalled the persistence of the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma in a context of growing political irrelevance. In addition, the Israeli campaign of arrests and targeted killings, coupled with the PNA's own repression, best exemplified by the assassination of Abu Ali Mustafa and the detention of Ahmad Sa'adat, further weakened the PFLP leadership.

Following Arafat's death and the end of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the PFLP's urgency to integrate into the new Palestinian political scenario led to its participation in the PNA's legislative and the presidential elections, respectively, in 2005 and 2006. As Hamas also joined the 2006 elections for the PLC, achieving a historic victory, the PFLP continued to fluctuate

between the two major political forces. Between 2005 and 2007, the PFLP passed from local coordination with Hamas during municipal elections to granting external support to its government in 2006, and finally to condemning its military seizure of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Again, the PFLP's dependence on the PLO/PNA framework was at the base of its fluctuation and its decision to side with Fatah and the PNA leadership, despite its manoeuvres to reverse the democratically elected Hamas government. The protracted PFLP inability to disengage from delegitimised and dysfunctional Palestinian institutions reflected the persistence of its opposition-integration dilemma. Furthermore, the PFLP's unclear positioning during the 2006–07 Hamas-Fatah split, and its continued adherence to a token mediating role well after the occurrence of such a split, confirmed the presence of the policy fluctuation pattern.

The analysis of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's history of decline acquires a wider resonance if read against other Leftist experiences in the Middle East. The inconsistencies and critical changes that the PFLP faced by acting within a struggling national liberation movement find relevant parallels in the political course of Egypt's communist movement and the Kurdish PKK. Such parallel looks at leftist trajectories underscored how the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's failure to revive their radical alternative can be inscribed within a context of hegemonic and counterhegemonic political proposals.

Egyptian communists, similar to the Palestinian Left, acted in a political arena defined by national liberation and anti-imperialism in which a dominant, and eventually ruling, nationalist force dictated the terms of political discourse, practice and confrontation. Between the early 1940s up to 1965, Egypt's communists remained a subaltern actor to the FOM and later the Nasserist regime and experienced a relation of cooperation and repression. The communists consistently sought integration in the Nasserist regime and in doing so espoused Nasser's own Arab nationalist take on anti-imperialism, the question of Palestine and Arab unification. The renounce to formulate a fully autonomous political project, alternative to hegemonic Nasserism, contributed to policy fluctuations and fragmentation within the communist movement. The Egyptian communists were thus left in an ancillary position, sanctioned by the 1965 dissolution in the ASU, and in a further parallel with the Palestinian Left, they would see the Islamist option as the only counterhegemonic project within Egyptian politics.

Conversely to the Palestinian and Egyptian cases, the PKK succeeded in maintaining popular mobilisation based on a radical and autonomous political proposal. Notwithstanding deep ideological and organisational changes, rather because of them, the PKK managed to consistently combine Kurdish self-determination and social revolution in its platform for political transformation. The rejection of nationalist state-building enabled the PKK to adapt to contingent developments and to abandon Kurdish separatism without losing a long-term credible goal. This was possible thanks to a deeper and more dynamic doctrinal elaboration compared to the PFLP's which allowed the PKK to confront rival project within the Kurdish national movement, first and foremost, the KRG's conservative autonomist model. The preservation of a counterhegemonic proposal, and the development of appropriate practices, helped the PKK to preserve its transnational relevance, thus avoiding the contradictions stemming from political subalternity as experienced by the PFLP and the Egyptian communist movement.

Tools and Concepts for the History(ies) of the Left(s)

The analysis of the PFLP's marginalisation process and the relevance of its underlying dynamics for the whole Palestinian Left can help to re-discuss the evolution of the Palestinian national movement in a historical perspective. At the same time, the regional echoes of such process contribute to the wider debate on leftist trajectories across the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. Methods and concepts employed and developed for a specific case study can become instruments useful to larger discussion on political legitimacy and revolutionary, transformative politics.

Within the context of Palestinian politics, the PFLP's trajectory of decline opens to new interpretations of the PLO role and functioning. Indeed, the outline of the opposition-integration dilemma allows an understanding of the PLO not only as the paramount platform of political action for its members. From the PFLP's oppositional perspective, the PLO framework consistently posed major constraints on its agency, something that did not concern other representatives of Palestinian radical politics, first and foremost Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This appears particularly clear with the decline of the PLO itself that followed the Oslo accords and

the establishment of the PNA. Given the PFLP's constant adherence to the PLO, despite its virtual disappearance, its institutional framework continued to affect the formulation of the Front's narrative and policies, ultimately embodying a barrier to its political revival.

The role of the PLO as unquestionable framework in the discourse and practice of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left represents an exhibition of the leftist relinquishment of its counterhegemonic role. The abandonment of what was a foundational premise for the action of the Palestinian Left within the PLO was identified thanks to the attention dedicated to political agency in the examination of the PFLP and leftist decline. However, the significance of such renounce acquires wider importance inasmuch as key factor in the production of the current Palestinian crisis of political representation. More specifically, the priorities shaping the PFLP's policies, first and foremost integration into the Palestinian institutional frameworks, point to its shortcomings in addressing central issues that should be at the centre of an effective leftist alternative. A political agency focused on institutional policies drove the PFLP to neglect fundamental social issues affecting the Palestinian population both in the diaspora and the OPT. For instance, the PFLP and the whole Left stopped addressing labour organisation, widespread youth unemployment and growing poverty in its political proposals. Likewise, the post-Oslo underrepresentation of the Palestinian diaspora in a context of growing marginalisation within hosting countries has been essentially ignored. These aspects combined with the PFLP's unwillingness, as well as that of other leftist forces, to disengage from dysfunctional institutional frameworks, thus protracting the current impasse of the Palestinian national movement. On another level, the PFLP and leftist limits in articulating a genuine alternative help to explain its position concerning the most recent developments in the Palestinian struggle for emancipation. For instance, the PFLP's "tactical" support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel rather than a "strategic" embrace or the lack of a developing position in the debate over possible alternatives to the two-state solution reflects the stagnation of PFLP and leftist political elaboration. Such stagnation is tightly linked to the PFLP's renounce to build and propose an actual counterhegemonic political project.

The focused analysis of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's decline also responded to the need to further investigate the decline, the survival and in some cases the resurgence of leftist factions worldwide, after the demise of the USSR. The prominent role played by subjective factors in

determining the PFLP's marginalisation suggests that these aspects should receive more attention in evaluating the experience of leftist organisations. The PFLP represents a case in which specific factors contributed to its decline as much as, or even more than, the crisis of global socialism. The opposite case of the PKK demonstrates how subjective factors have determined the resilience and resurgence of leftist politics, notwithstanding an ostensible global negative trend.

Some of the concepts elaborated on the PFLP's case proved to be informative for the study of other national liberation movements in the region and beyond. Above all, the concept of opposition-integration dilemma is effective in the analysis of Marxist factions' participation in wider national fronts. As a practical manifestation of the thorny problem of relations between Marxism and nationalism, such dilemma for instance also affected the Egyptian communist movement. The defining status of discourses on national liberation and self-determination in several countries of the Middle East and North Africa hints to further opportunities for developing a debate on the unresolved confrontation between nationalist and leftist politics, especially in light of the long-standing centrality of nationalist rhetoric and legitimacy. Hence, the relevance of concepts such as the opposition-integration dilemma in the observation of political agency as practical manifestation of theoretical and cultural conundrums. Moreover, the study of leftist trajectories within national movements on these terms provided a fresh perspective on the relations between state and non-state actors. The place of statehood as strategic goal for national liberation movements and the centrality of national emancipation in post-colonial states help bridging such gap. In particular, the parallel evaluation of the Palestinian, Egyptian and Kurdish cases showed how state-dominated and stateless polities can be considered along the same ideas and analytical tools.

To conclude, this study is also a contribution to the academic and public debate on possible new and alternative forms of Palestinian political organisation. Such historiographical contribution complements the spreading interest that academia is showing towards new political phenomena marking the current Palestinian national movement, BDS above all. Furthermore, since well-established Palestinian political actors seem unable today to ensure any progress for the Palestinian cause, it is paramount to look at the history of the Palestinian national movement to identify those factors that determined the current circumstances and continue to foster the political impasse. Only by challenging long-standing

assumptions and internal contradictions can the actors of the Palestinian national movement achieve a genuine and much needed renewal.

Note

1. Mahmud Al-Sa'di, 'Intilaq al-Tajammuʿ al-Dimuqrati al-Filastini: Istiʿadat al-Wahda wa Inhaʾ al-Inqisam (Launch of the Palestinian Democratic Gathering: Restoring Unity and Ending Division)', *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 3 January 2019, accessed February 12, 2020, https://bit.ly/2UN3zxI; PFLP, 'Al-Tajammuʿ al-Dimuqrati al-Filastini: Izhar Bidun Thamar (The Palestinian Democratic Gathering: Flowers without Fruits)', 27 July 2019, accessed February 12, 2020, https://bit.ly/31M8IHP.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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