

History of the PLO mainstream

after the Jordan crisis, Arafat was able to deal with the Arab state apparatuses as Chairman of the PLO (their own creation): this was a much stronger position from which to deal than that of a militarily vanquished guerrilla leader. Had a governing basically unsympathetic to guerrilla aims still been in control of the PLO at this time, the Organisation could easily, in the period of the guerrillas' military weakness, have been turned into a further weapon in official Arab hands against them. As it was, the guerrillas' continuing links, through the PLO, with the Arab regimes acted as a useful safety-net during that period, in which they were able, at the political level, at least, to absorb their rolling defeats at the hands of Hussein's troops.

But the Fatch core, while they still did not change their basic commitment to non-intervention in the Arab states' internal affairs, remained wary of being trapped into a role which would restrict them to being solely the creatures of the regimes in the way they had accused Shuqairy of being. To this end, following the defeats in Jordan, they sought to cover the patient rebuilding of their guerrilla forces, this time mainly in Lebanon, not only through their official PLO connections with Arab state leaders; they also, though it is extremely doubtful if this was a unanimous or even a majority decision inside the Fatch leadership, sanctioned the launching of a selective terror campaign against Israeli and Jordanian targets on a world-wide basis. Salah Khalaf argued in his book that the emergence of the 'Black September Organisation' was a purely spontaneous reaction on the behalf of some embittered rank and filers from a number of existing guerrilla groups, including Fatch, to the events in Jordan.⁵³ Other sources, mainly Israeli, have linked Black September to Khalaf himself, and to fellow Fatch security officials Mohamed Daoud Awda and Ali Hassan Salameh. Awda, in a much-quoted televised 'confession' made after the Jordanians arrested him in February 1973 while reportedly on a mission in Jordan, said, 'There is no such thing called Black September. Fatch announced its operations under this name so that Fatch would not appear as the direct executor of the operations.'⁵⁴

Throughout the two years following the summer of 1971, a large part of the confrontation between the Israelis and the Palestinians was carried out in the form of a 'war of spooks' in Europe, Asia, even the United States, and of course the Middle East. Black September's most spectacular operation was the seizure of 11 Israeli athletes at the September 1972 Olympic Games in Munich; they killed one of the athletes who tried to resist capture there; the rest, plus five of the eight Black Septembrists, were killed in explosions and a hail of cross-fire as German police tried to ambush the Palestinians at a military airport near Munich. Immediately afterwards, the Israeli armed forces hit back with air raids against Palestinian refugee

camps and border villages in Lebanon, killing 14 civilians, and shortly thereafter with a land invasion of the area in which 19 Lebanese troops and 25 civilians were killed, along with an unknown number of Palestinian guerrillas.⁵⁵

Some time in 1972 – and there are some indications that this was almost immediately after the Munich affair – the Fatah leadership reportedly decided to halt the flirtation which some of its members had been carrying out with the Black Septemberists. The necessary instructions were passed down through the Fatah apparatuses; but in two cases, Fatah members who had previously been entrusted by the leadership with the task of liaising with Black September's governmental backers responded to these instructions by effectively defecting to the governments with which they had been liaising. This was what happened to Ahmed Abdel-Ghaffar (Abu Mahmoud), with Libya; and to Sabri al-Banna (Abu Nidal), with Iraq. When these defections had become apparent, the Fatah leadership pronounced a death sentence on both these men. In autumn 1974, Abdel-Ghaffar was to venture back to see old contacts in Lebanon, and was shot dead 'in mysterious circumstances' in Beirut. Banna, however, continued to evade his death sentence, and was to prove a constant irritant to his erstwhile comrades throughout the following decade.⁵⁶

In April 1973, the Israelis were able to bring off a significant coup when their commandos landed by night on a Beirut beach and drove to the apartments of Fatah PLO leaders Kamal Udwan and Muhammed Youssef al-Najjar (Abu Youssef, then serving as the PLO's 'Foreign Minister'), killing them along with the Palestinian poet Kamal Nasir, who was then the PLO spokesman. An Israeli intelligence officer was killed in Madrid; a number of Fatah members and sympathisers were killed in various European capitals; the PFLP spokesman, Ghassan Kanafani, also a prolific writer of short stories, was blown up by a car-bomb along with his young niece, Lamis; and several other officials in the PLO and the guerrilla groups were badly disfigured by letter-bombs.

Nonetheless, while all this was going on, the guerrilla groups were slowly able to rebuild in Lebanon the military formations which had previously been smashed in Jordan. The Israeli secret services were apparently so caught up in their 'war of spooks' against the Palestinians that they failed to take proper account during those years of the gradual build-up of the regular armies' military strength in both Egypt and Syria.

On 6 October 1973, the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a combined attack against the Israeli troops which had still, more than six years after the June 1967 war, not moved back from the 1967 cease-fire lines deep within these two states' sovereign lands. This was, to be in Egyptian President Sadat's view, at least, a limited regular war, which could serve as a

catalyst for the long-stalled Middle East peace process.

According to Khalaf, Sadat had given a preliminary indication to Qaddumi and himself in mid-August of 1973 that the Egyptian war effort would be imminent.⁵⁷ Then, on 9 September, Sadat invited Arafat, Qaddumi and Khalaf to another meeting where he outlined his plan in detail, this time emphasising the postwar phase. He himself would call for the convening of a peace conference. He did not specify that it would be in Geneva, but he listed the countries that would be represented. They were almost the same as those which actually participated in December of the same year: the United States, the U.S.S.R., Israel, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and the PLO.⁵⁸

The Fateh leaders were thus able to prepare some of their own units, and some PLA units, to take part in the coming war. According to Heikal, 'It was on Monday 1 October that some officers of the [Palestinian] resistance and about 120 other ranks had arrived in Cairo to take part in the battle.'⁵⁹ These were deployed, along with some Kuwaiti troops who also reached Egypt during the war, in the Canal Zone near the soon-to-be-famous Deversoir Lake. Khalaf wrote that, in addition,

A number of PLA units had been helicoptered behind Israeli lines on the first day of the fighting and seized four hills of Kuneitra in the Golan. From South Lebanon, fedayeen commandos crossed over into Israel to attack the rear lines of the Jewish army in Upper Galilee. Others shelled a number of Kibbutzim beyond the Lebanese border. As of October 6, some 70,000 Palestinian workers employed by Israeli enterprises went on strike in the West Bank and Gaza.⁶⁰

Other guerrilla units, totalling around 1,000 men, made ready to move into Jordan, whence they hoped to be able to cross into the southern Israeli region around Al-Aghwar, but, according to Heikal, King Hussein refused to let them cross and Sadat, when first asked to intervene with Hussein on 11 October, replied that he 'doubted whether there was much he could do'. When, one week later, it became clear the Israelis were getting the upper hand in the battle, Sadat thought the time had come for the 1,000 guerrillas 'to perform some useful functions, such as attacks on Israeli communications'. However, the Egyptian President was now unable to reach King Hussein, whose aides at first kept saying he was out of Amman; when Sadat finally got through to him, Hussein stalled just long enough to render the whole question academic.⁶¹

In the 1973 war the Arab states' regular armies did not win anything like an outright military victory: nevertheless, they certainly did not meet the fate predicted for any efforts on their behalf by the article in *Filastinuna* 11 years before. But then their aim, in 1973, was never to 'liberate Palestine', merely to regain some of their own occupied lands, at least as a position from which to bargain – an aim which many public figures throughout the

world (except in Israel) could understand to one degree or another.

The Palestinians, having contributed to the 1973 war effort, hoped to be able to profit from the diplomatic process which followed it; indeed, in the first flush of Arab self-confidence at the end of 1973 that aim did not seem too far-fetched. The guerrilla movement had come a long way since 1967: it had grown explosively, won a consensus of Palestinian popular support, gained inter-Arab legitimacy, been cut down to size (in Jordan), but nevertheless bounced back with most of its Arab alliances intact. It was therefore with some degree of their own self-confidence that the Fatah/PLO leaders approached the postwar period.

Caught in the Lebanon net (1973-76)

On 22 October 1973, the United Nations Security Council passed its first resolution calling for a cease-fire in the 16-day-old Middle East war; but Israeli units commanded by General Ariel Sharon continued their movement southwards from Deversoir, along the *west* bank of the Suez Canal, and within two days had completely cut off supply lines to the Egyptian Third Army now trapped on the *east* bank.¹

It was on 26 October that Fatah's Salah Khalaf and Farouq al-Qadumi, who had both stayed in Cairo throughout the war, went to President Sadat's Tabra Palace. The question with which the Egyptian leader confronted them there was one which was to haunt the Fatah leadership for most of the next four years. According to Khalaf 'Before we even had a chance to sit down he asked us point-blank: "Well now, will you agree to participate in the Geneva Peace Conference?"'² The two men did not feel they could provide an answer right there and then. The next day, they travelled to Beirut, where they convened an enlarged meeting of the Fatah leadership to discuss Sadat's question. As Khalaf recalled it

A long discussion ensued. Sadat had placed us in a difficult, not to say impossible, situation. Everyone was agreed not to reject the principle of a peace conference out of hand, but it would have been just as imprudent to reply affirmatively. We couldn't simply overlook the fact that the cease-fire had been established on the basis of Resolution 242, which as I said before denies the Palestinians their most elementary rights. So we decided not to reply either way until we received a formal invitation. It was only then that we would be in a position to define our position in a clear and precise manner.³

Two weeks later, on 12 November, Sadat received Yasser Arafat, who had been sent to Cairo to explain the answer Fatah had painstakingly hammered out to the Egyptian leader's question. Khalaf wrote, 'Arafat found Sadat's attitude surprising: He seemed distant, practically indifferent as to what decision we had reached. Arafat got the distinct impression that Sadat was no longer concerned by our participation in the Geneva meeting.'⁴

What had happened to change Sadat's attitude in the interim was that the

Palestinians' old adversary from the Jordanian events of 1970, Dr Kissinger – now elevated to the position of Secretary of State in addition to continuing as National Security Advisor to a President Nixon now well on the way down the slippery slope called Watergate – had been starting on his Middle East 'shuttle diplomacy'. In the five days from 6 to 11 November, Kissinger succeeded in concluding the first bilateral disengagement agreement between Egyptian and Israeli forces.

Over the next two years, the Palestinians were to see Kissinger's successive bilateral approaches to the Middle East problem steadily undercutting the chances of convening the kind of all-party peace conference that Sadat had previously seemed to be promising them. On 31 May 1974, Kissinger succeeded in having Israeli and Syrian negotiators sign an interim agreement which roughly paralleled on the Golan the provisions previously agreed for the Sinai front. On 1 September 1975, the Egyptians and Israelis signed their second agreement, known as Sinai II. It was with a kind of bitter irony that the Palestinians came to realise that a powerful inducement to Sadat to get this step-by-step process under way in the first place had been the entrapment of the Egyptian Third Army east of the Deversoir, of which the Palestinians' own forces stationed in that area had warned the Egyptian High Command back on 12 October, the day General Sharon's men had first reached the Deversoir region. 'The Egyptian officials,' wrote Khalaf of that warning, 'sent no reinforcements to defend this crucial position.'⁵

Kissinger's main aim, during and after the 1973 Middle East war, was simple to describe, if more awesome to contemplate in execution: it was to use the opportunities provided by the war to monopolise for the United States the external diplomatic initiative concerning the Arab-Israeli problem, excluding the Soviets, and if possible also the Europeans, from any meaningful diplomatic role in the region. He had meanwhile somehow to parry the oil weapon which the Arab oil producers had unsheathed towards the end of the October fighting. His attitude to the Palestinians during all this was to try to 'isolate' them.⁶ The Secretary of State succeeded brilliantly in realising all his main aims. The Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, was co-Chairman at the brief one-day session of the Geneva Peace Conference which was held on 21 December 1973, but was deftly kept out of all of the succeeding negotiations, as were the Europeans. On the following 18 March, all Arab oil producers except Libya and Syria lifted the oil embargo against the United States.

In his memoirs of this period, Kissinger's one regret concerning his Middle East policy was that he was unable to win any concessions from the Israelis for his old friend in Jordan, the 'tough little King', Hussein.⁷ Hussein's problem was that, on the one hand, he had intentionally not

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been included in or included himself in the Egyptian-Syrian war effort, and thus could claim some of the diplomatic spoils of war; and on the other, that the Israeli government was far less willing to make territorial or even purely political concessions on the West Bank, which had been the Hashemites' Jordan from 1948 to 1967, than it was in Sinai or even on the strategic Golan. As Kissinger repeatedly – if somewhat disingenuously – records having told everyone throughout his shuttle diplomacy, his role was simply to transmit and explain the ideas of each side to the other, and not to argue for any American-originated plan. He was not, however, without good advice. For example, he records having told a group of American Jewish leaders on 8 February 1974:

I predict that if the Israelis don't make some sort of arrangement with Hussein on the West Bank in six months, Arafat will become internationally recognized and the world will be in chaos. If I were an advisor to the Israeli Government, I would tell the Prime Minister: 'For God's sake do something with Hussein while he is still one of the players.'

But neither for God's sake, nor for Kissinger's, could the Israelis bring themselves to do this; and Kissinger misread his forecast by only two and a half months. For on 28 October 1974, the Seventh Arab Summit meeting in Rabat solemnly affirmed 'the right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent national authority under the command of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the *sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people*, in any Palestinian territory that is liberated'.⁸ Hussein, who had been imploring Kissinger for any Israeli concession to him in the West Bank, even just a withdrawal from the city of Jericho,⁹ was now formally out of the diplomatic ballgame, and the PLO was seeking a way to get in.

The Fatah leadership had prepared the PLO quite thoroughly for the diplomatic involvement which they hoped would follow from the Rabat summit's decision. According to Khalaf, it had been back in July 1967 that Fatah al-Qaddumi had first proposed to his colleagues in the Fatah Central Committee that 'we take a stand in favor of a ministe in the West Bank in the event that Israel would withdraw from these two territories it had just conquered'.¹⁰ But the scheme had been considered too radically conciliatory at that time, and had been shelved; the following year Fatah had enunciated its aim of creating a 'secular democratic state' in Palestine instead. But the fighting in Jordan of 1970-71 provoked yet another reconsideration of goals. According to Khalaf:

After the massacres of Amman – and especially after the expulsion of the last fedayeen from Hashemite territory, it was only too evident that the Palestinian revolution could not count on any Arab state to provide a secure sanctuary or an operational base against Israel. In order to forge ahead toward the democratic