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The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Decline (1982-2007).

Political Agency and Marginalisation.

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Abstract.

This thesis examines the political trajectory of the Popular Front for the Liberation Palestine (PFLP) during the period from the 1982 eviction of the Palestinian factions from their headquarters in Beirut, to the 2006-07 division between Hamas and Fatah in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). During this period, the PFLP experienced a process of decline that resulted in its marginalisation within the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the wider Palestinian national movement. This study addresses the issue of the PFLP's decline by focusing on its own political agency to determine the role of policy and decision making, ideology and political narrative in the marginalisation process.

This work therefore, on the one hand, aims at putting the PFLP's decline into historical perspective, identifying it as a process rather than simply the effect of outstanding events as it is often argued. On the other, its goal is to ascribe to 'subjective factors', namely aspects directly linked to the PFLP's agency, the adequate weight in determining its decline. This appears particularly significant as the weakening of the Palestinian left has been frequently explained as a by-product of global and local external or 'objective' developments such as the downfall of the Soviet Union or the emergence of political Islam. By providing a comprehensive and processual analysis of the PFLP's decline, this study not only aims at complementing the literature on the Palestinian national movement, which still lacks a focused approach on the main Palestinian leftist force. It also aims at shedding light on a major cause, and its historical origins, of the current Palestinian political impasse, namely the absence of an alternative between Hamas and the PNA's governing entities, both crippled by a legitimacy crisis and unable to progress Palestinian interests. By virtue of its close survey of the PFLP's conduct, a further goal of this thesis is to address the historical role of the PLO and its *de-facto* heir, the PNA. What is evidenced is the double, and contradictory, role of the essential but also constraining framework that the PLO and later the PNA represented for the PFLP's policies.

The focus on the PFLP's political agency allows the identification of a pattern in its policy which affected negatively its standing within the Palestinian national movement. Throughout the period addressed, policy fluctuation marked the PFLP's action, undermining the effectiveness of its political line and jeopardising its political

weight. The present study highlights how such a policy fluctuation pattern originated from major dilemmas and contradictions that the PFLP had to consider while producing its policies. The main dilemma, informing all other sources of tensions affecting the PFLP, has been defined as an 'opposition-integration' dilemma. In other words, the PFLP, while opposing the PLO leadership's policies, first and foremost its quest for a diplomatic settlement with Israel under US patronage, needed to maintain its integration within the PLO regime, which represented an essential economic and political framework. This produced inconsistent, 'fluctuant' policies that prevented the PFLP from maintaining its political weight and stopping its marginalisation process. This opposition-integration dilemma was combined with other sources of tensions marking the PFLP such as: relations with other PLO opposition factions, relations with Arab partners, its contacts with Palestinian Islamists, the confrontation with the PNA after the 1993 Oslo accords or the internal divide between the exiled leadership and the cadres located in the OPT.

The PFLP's official publications, mainly retrieved from its mouthpiece, *Al-Hadaf* magazine, embodied the main source upon which this study relies. Beside this corpus of documents, other primary sources, such as documents issued by relevant actors, have been scrutinised, while all information has been read against the background of the wider academic literature currently available on the Palestinian national movement. This research also drew information from interviews with former and current PFLP members as well as with experts of the Palestinian national movement.

Lay summary.

The present thesis studies the history of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the main Palestinian leftist faction and second movement for size and popularity within the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the umbrella organisation internationally recognised as representative of the Palestinian people. This thesis addresses the period between 1982 and 2007, as the PFLP experienced a marginalisation process during this time lapse. Such process started after the eviction of the Palestinian forces from their headquarters in Beirut following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and appeared completed in 2007, when the conflict between Fatah, ruling party of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Hamas, its main, Islamist rival, consecrated the polarisation of the Palestinian political field.

In analysing this marginalisation process, the thesis focuses on the PFLP's political agency, namely its decision-making process, policy production and the evolution of its political line to investigate the role of these 'subjective factors' in its decline. The goal is to outline how the PFLP responded to outstanding challenges (downfall of Soviet Union, rise of Islamist rivals, etc.) to provide a deeper, more complete description of the dynamics causing its decline. Based on this approach, this study describes a 'policy fluctuation' pattern affecting the PFLP negatively and resurfacing throughout the period addressed. By policy fluctuation what is meant is the PFLP's inability to produce a consistent political line capable of balancing the different sources of pressures, both internal and external, endured over the time. The result was a fluctuation between such sources of pressure that undermined the effectiveness of the PFLP's agenda, its political credibility and popular support. In the investigation of the sources of pressures, or contradictions, producing policy fluctuation, this study outlines a fundamental dynamic, influencing all other relevant factors: the opposition-integration dilemma. This dilemma, characterising the PFLP all over its history but whose effects were exacerbated after 1982, consists in the pursuit of opposition to the PLO leadership, namely Fatah, while considering integration into the PLO institutions, and therefore its overall unity, as a priority. This dilemma combined with other dynamics, such as relations with other Palestinian forces, relations with regional allies or internal divisions, worsening the policy fluctuations pattern.

The thesis follows a chronological order to keep track of the aforementioned dynamics over the time. The first two chapters focuses on the period between 1982 and 1987. Specifically, they respectively treat the PFLP's policies towards the Palestinian internal situation, marked by deep divisions and the PFLP's relations with Syria and the USSR. The third chapter addresses the PFLP's conduct during the first half of the First Intifada (1987-1990) to show how returning problems jeopardised the PFLP's chances to revive its political course. The fourth chapter covers the 1990s, a decade of great transformations with the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO and the advent of the PNA. The fifth and last chapter approaches the history of the Second Intifada (2000-2005) and of the following years until the 2006-2007 Fatah-Hamas conflict.

Thesis Declaration.

This is to certify that:

- the work contained within has been composed by me, and
- this is entirely my own work, and
- no part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed: F.S. Leopardi   Date: 09 October 2017

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Abbreviations.

AMB	Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades
ANM	Arab Nationalist Movement
APF	Alliance of Palestinian Forces
BDS	Boycott Divestment and Sanctions
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DA	Democratic Alliance
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
DoP	Declaration of Principles
FPR	Forces of Popular Resistance
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions
GUPW	General Union of Palestinian Women
JCP	Jordanian Communist Party
JRA	Japanese Red Army
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
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLF	Palestine 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
SLA	South Lebanese Army
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
WYM	Workers' Youth Movement

Table of Contents.

Introduction.

In September 2015, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) experienced an upsurge in tensions as masses of Palestinian youth started a '*habba shaʿbiyya'*, a minor popular uprising, against the Israeli occupation. Over a period of several months, Palestinian individuals and groups attacked Israeli settlers in the OPT, army outposts and soldiers as well as Israeli citizens beyond the Green Line and the Separation Barrier.[1] Attackers were in most cases younger than twenty and often resorted to the use of knives, from which stemmed the name of 'Intifada of the Knives' to describe the uprising. The most striking feature of this *habba* was that most Palestinians involved in the attacks were very young and politically unaffiliated. In a stark contrast with its two wider precedents (the 1987 Intifada and the 2000 Al-Aqsa Intifada), Palestinian factions did not play a direct and significant role in organising and orienting popular protests. Fatah's leaders and officials from the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), tied to security cooperation with Israel under the terms of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, provided only token support to the Palestinian youngsters with statements justifying their actions. The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), not compromised by the Oslo requirements, displayed a slightly more substantial involvement as some attacks were claimed by cells affiliated to the organisation. Nonetheless, its political and military leaderships did not push for an escalation of the uprising and did not hold up the operations organised independently by a few Hamas members. Besides the two main Palestinian political forces, smaller factions with a remarkable militant record also did not distinguish themselves for their participation in the *habba*. For instance, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which did not abandon armed struggle and still formally opposes the peace process, limited itself to verbal support. Notwithstanding its calls for the establishment of a unified Palestinian leadership and its communiques recalling those published during the First Intifada, no coordinated

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[1] The so-called "Green Line" is the pre-1967 war border separating Israeli territories from those under the control of neighbouring Arab countries. It is still used today to refer to the demarcation line between formal Israeli territories and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The "Separation Barrier" is a 700 km-long, concrete wall running along the Green Line in the West Bank. Its track was conceived to include most of Israeli settlements in the West Bank as well as strategic natural resources. Consequently, it was mostly built within Palestinian territory.

action on the ground followed. Such detachment between the Palestinian factions and those individuals and groups carrying out the attacks highlighted the emergence of a disenfranchised generation raised after the Al-Aqsa Intifada that does not identify itself with the traditional Palestinian political forces.

In such problem of representation lies a clear sign of the political and legitimacy crisis that the Palestinian national movement has experienced for at least a decade. While two authorities, Hamas in Gaza and the PNA and its ruling party Fatah in the West Bank, contend for primacy, apparently no political and social force is able 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 achieving 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 framework in which to voice, struggle for, and fulfil their political and social needs.

In light of this crisis and of the political polarisation of the Palestinian national movement, the issue of an alternative 'third way' between the 'peace process', 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. Indeed, the Palestinian Left's legacy of both social and national emancipation, its pioneering mobilisation of labour, women and students as well as its historical contribution in terms of intellectual and ideological elaboration should represent solid bases upon which to establish an alternative to the current deadlock. Nonetheless, the Palestinian Left appears marginalised within Palestinian politics and its factions display little influence on the general orientations of the national movement. Therefore, studying the reasons behind the current condition of the Palestinian left, entails a clearer understanding of the crisis affecting Palestinian politics nowadays.

The present study approaches the issue of the Palestinian Left's decline, addressing the marginalisation that its main faction, the PFLP, has experienced

throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century and beyond. 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. By virtue of its strong adherence to armed struggle, its strict organisational rules and its Marxist-Leninist, but also Maoist, ideological setting, the PFLP has been historically considered as the hard-line, revolutionary actor within the national movement. In fact, its image of revolutionary 'purity' has been often put in contrast with Fatah's pragmatism, which the PFLP itself often charged with opportunism. Therefore, its increasing irrelevance entailed a void in terms of political reference within the Palestinian national movement that appears more significant as the Islamist alternative faces an impasse similar to that of the nationalist-secular camp.

In its analysis of the PFLP's decline, this study adopts a historical and processual approach in which its conduct is put into historical perspective while its marginalisation is seen as a process rather than just a result of single factors or events. As the review of relevant literature will show, to date academic studies on the Palestinian national movement still lack a comprehensive, historical view on the decline of the major Palestinian leftist faction. However, as it has been argued so far, the attempt to develop a comprehensive study of the PFLP's trajectory throughout its marginalisation process not only entails filling a gap in Palestinian political historiography. A wider goal is that of addressing a major factor behind the current Palestinian crisis of legitimacy and popular representation, namely the PFLP and other leftist factions' inability to embody an effective alternative to the two main poles (Hamas and Fatah/PNA) of Palestinian politics. In other words, understanding the shortcomings of the PFLP's political action, and the causes that produced them, means comprehending a major reason behind the lack of political and organisational renewal fuelling the current impasse of the Palestinian national movement.

This historical and processual approach to the PFLP's decline entails a focus on its collective agency conceived as the complex of narratives, priority formulation, positions and decisions that the PFLP adopted to tackle its political

crisis. The importance of such an approach lies in the possibility of drawing a pattern in the PFLP's political agency. The definition of this pattern, allows us to challenge static views of the PFLP's marginalisation that single out specific factors and events without defining a relational network. Ultimately, the historical perspective, coupled with the focus on agency, enables us to shed 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 up 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. In fact, the exploration of the PFLP's marginalisation process allows us to investigate 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 in the framework of umbrella organisations and quasi-state entities. The PFLP's case thus appears linked to that of other leftist organisations participating in wider national fronts. While this study does not uphold a comparative approach, the concepts outlined herein might also be relevant for the study of relations among political forces in the context of national liberation movement in the Middle East and other areas.

The focus on the PFLP's decline, conceived as the weakening of a historically relevant leftist force, represents another reason for the relevance of this thesis beyond the field of Palestine studies. Indeed, the example provided herein aims at demonstrating that the marginalisation of once central leftist forces worldwide was not a mere consequence of the end of the Socialist block. Through its focus on political agency, this study stresses the relevance of 'individual' aspects, distinguishing single cases. While avoiding all claims of exceptionalism, this thesis shows the importance of relating general and specific factors in order to understand satisfactorily the trajectory of single political organisations.

Therefore, the approach adopted to analyse the PFLP's case can also be considered useful to grasp the reasons behind more successful, leftist political experiences in the post-Cold War era, whether they be in the Middle East, Europe or Latin America.

Subjective Factors and Policy Fluctuation.

The history of the PFLP outlined in this thesis stretches over 25 years, between two of the most significant and traumatic events in the history of the Palestinian national movement: the eviction of the PLO from its headquarter in Beirut following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 2007 definitive geographical and political split between the Hamas-ruled Gaza and the West Bank under Fatah/PNA control.

The significance of this period in relation to the PFLP lies in the gradual decline that the Front experienced during this time span. The loss of the Lebanese sanctuary in 1982 and the ensuing virtual end of armed struggle as 'main tool to liberate Palestine' was a hard blow for the whole PLO, but it marked the beginning of an especially critical era for the PFLP. While the PLO leadership could rely on wider international networks and contacts and decided to focus on diplomatic activity, the PFLP was deprived of such options. This, coupled with the diminution of the PFLP's political autonomy, its loss of the popular and political support network enjoyed in Lebanon, and the renewed global interest in a political settlement, threw the PFLP's 'radical alternative' to Fatah into crisis. While before 1982 the PFLP managed to exert a stronger influence within the PLO, in particular by constraining Arafat's power and individualism, after the eviction from Beirut, its political weight appeared in decline. Notwithstanding the efforts that the PFLP spent to retain its weight and influence within the national movement, also in view of the evolving political scenarios which emerged between 1982 and 2007, the marginalisation process did not stop. The unfolding and conclusion of the Hamas-Fatah conflict in 2007 and, specifically, the PFLP's conduct throughout it, represented the conclusive step in its declining trajectory. In the following years, the PFLP remained on the margins of Palestinian politics, while the whole national movement continued to

be faced with the impasse stemming from political polarisation, lack of renewal and dysfunctional institutions. Such persistent marginalisation thus prompts the need to investigate the PFLP's agency and conduct to identify the reasons behind its ineffectiveness in retaining political influence within the Palestinian national movement.

In addressing, the PFLP's marginalisation within Palestinian politics, the present study borrows two categories from Jamil Hilal's book '*al-Yasar al-Filastini. Ila ʾAyna?* (The Palestinian Left. Where to?)' to analyse the factors influencing the PFLP's trajectory, namely 'subjective and objective' factors.[2] Objective factors consist of external developments and events outside the PFLP's control and are often highlighted as the main causes for its decline. From this stems the necessity to focus on subjective factors which can be identified with the PFLP's own agency in facing such developments. By prioritising subjective factors, this study does not aim at asserting their overall predominance over outstanding objective factors. Rather the goal 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. The PFLP is thus seen as an active agent capable of not only reacting to critical circumstances, but also of shaping its own fortunes within the Palestinian national movement.

Such focus on the PFLP's agency acquires further importance as it allows us to delineate a pattern in its policies that has persisted throughout different historical and political phases. Indeed, the observation of the PFLP's response in terms of policies and political narrative to evolving, internal and external sources of pressure between 1982 and 2007 allows the identification of a policy fluctuation scheme. In the present study, policy fluctuation is conceived as the PFLP's inability to balance the diversified and often contradictory factors affecting the production of its policy line. Such inability consequently results in a political agency which lacks the necessary coherence, preventing the PFLP from achieving the goals spelled in its agenda. Therefore, this thesis argues that the PFLP's fluctuations throughout the period addressed impacted negatively

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[2] Jamil Hilal, *Al-Yasar Al-Filastini. Ila ʾAyna? (The Palestinian Left. Where To?)* (Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2009).

both its political effectiveness and its credibility and popularity among the Palestinian population. From this perspective, policy fluctuation should be considered a major cause for its 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. In relation to a political movement, pragmatism is seen as the ability to change fundamental positions and readdress political agency according to the evolution of the actual conditions in which it operates. Changes are thus supposed to have a deep scope and to be included in a general reformist framework. Indeed, pragmatism has been a feature marking all the different actors animating the Palestinian national movement. The lack of assets typical of state actors, such as a mostly undisputed territorial base or stable economic resources, has turned pragmatism in an essential aspect underlying the survival of Palestinian movements. For instance, pragmatism marked the PFLP leadership's decision to fully embrace Marxist-Leninism following the DFLP's defection, which challenged the PFLP on ideological grounds. In the context of intra-factional competition within the Palestinian national movement in the late 1960s, the PFLP implemented ideological reform in its contention for popular support with other factions.

Conversely, policy fluctuation entails the pursuit of an inconsistent political line in an 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 jeopardises 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, this study argues and outlines that policy fluctuation ultimately prevailed over pragmatism. As the review of relevant literature will show, Asʿad AbuKhalil has already highlighted the concept of policy fluctuation in the PFLP's case. Nonetheless, the present study widens the set of factors behind it outlining both the overall and specific aspects that led to the fluctuation pattern. Moreover, this research demonstrates the recurrence of such a pattern throughout the most recent history of the PFLP,

thus identifying in it a primary reason for its current marginalisation within Palestinian politics as consequence of political ineffectiveness.

The aforementioned dilemmas can be seen as sources of pressures representing the points between which the PFLP's agency oscillated. The main dilemma affecting the PFLP, and resurfacing throughout the period addressed, stemmed from its role of opposition to the Fatah leadership of the national movement within a context of integration and adherence to the institutional framework that the PLO embodied. While opposing the PLO leadership constantly remained a priority for the PFLP, protecting the political and institutional unity of the national movement was no less important.

This study defines such dynamic as 'opposition-integration dilemma' which influenced the whole of the PFLP's agency. While the PFLP contested consistently Fatah's leadership of the PLO as well as its policies, this did not entail a challenge to the role and legitimacy of the PLO itself. Indeed, the PFLP's first generation leaders, and particularly George Habash, shared with Yasser Arafat and other prominent Fatah leaders the principles characterising the PLO after the 1969 takeover by the armed factions. In particular, the preservation of Palestinian unity, the refusal of intra-Palestinian violence, and the defence of Palestinian political autonomy, best expressed by an independent PLO, constituted the basis for the PFLP's 'loyal opposition' to Fatah. Moreover, the PLO membership granted the PFLP a level of political influence and vital resources for its own structure and activities unattainable outside its institutional framework. Access to the Palestinian National Fund or the possibility of participating in an internationally-recognised political platform embodied significant advantages for a national, liberation movement that did not enjoy the majority of popular support within its reference community. The PFLP's adherence to the PLO platform was also linked to its attachment to the original rules regulating intra-factional relations, notwithstanding their gradual dismissal, especially after 1982. Indeed, the PFLP consistently conceived its ties with other Palestinian factions, also those outside the PLO, through the consensus-building approach that dominated Palestinian political life in the early years after the armed organisations' takeover. This strengthened the PFLP's

interest in maintaining integration into the Palestinian official institutions. In light of these aspects, the PFLP's thrust to integration endured beyond the PLO marginalisation, generating a contradictory relation with the institutions established after the 1993 Oslo accords.

However, the PFLP's membership of the PLO limited the action range of its opposition to Fatah in ways similar, although to a different extent, to the limitations that Arafat's movement faced by participating in an umbrella organisation. In other words, while pursuing its own agenda, the PFLP had to balance constantly its priorities as an opposition party and its interests in preserving its integration within national institutions. This dynamic was in place, for instance, when the PFLP suspended its membership of the PLO Executive Committee in 1974 to protest the adoption of the Fatah and DFLP-backed 'Ten-Point Program', which opened up the possibility of a two-state solution of the conflict with Israel. In fact, the suspension did not question the PFLP's participation in the PLO, notwithstanding its harsh criticism of the new political course. However, the opposition-integration dilemma emerged with full clarity in the early 1980s, when majority politics disavowed the consensus principle that distinguished the PLO decision-making process, thus significantly reducing the PFLP's power to influence, constrain or even veto Fatah's line. Such a major shift in internal PLO politics had a paramount influence on how the PFLP responded to the challenges which emerged in the post-Beirut phase on the national, regional and international levels. Specifically, the result of this influence was the intensification of the PFLP's policy fluctuation.

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. Hence, the role of armed struggle, the PFLP's idea of Palestinian state and the historical hard-line towards diplomatic solutions for the Israeli-Arab 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 consensus within the PLO and, in turn, influence on its policies. Although these tensions had already emerged in previous circumstances, again with the PLO adoption of the Ten-Point Program for instance, the specific aspects of the post-Beirut phase emphasised their impact on the PFLP itself.

On the Palestinian level, the priority of implementing an effective counterbalance to 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. Disputes on such aspects joined long-standing leftist factionalism and rivalry, especially in the case of PFLP-DFLP relations, which hindered the implementation of effective power-sharing. The ensuing tensions ultimately contributed to undermining the coherence and viability of the PFLP's political line. While the PFLP regularly pursued opposition through coalition politics, this strategy clashed with its own interest in maintaining factional integration in the PLO. In other words, the oppositional priority at the base of coalition building conflicted with the PFLP's interest in individual integration in the PLO framework, thus producing an inconsistent political line. Similar tensions resurfaced as the PFLP attempted political association with Palestinian Islamists, namely Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to compact opposition against the 1993 Israel-PLO Oslo accords. Beyond ideological differences, the Islamist, and particularly Hamas, challenge to the status of the PLO, and its *de-facto* heir the PNA, as supreme Palestinian institutional framework, jeopardised relations with the PFLP. Indeed, while in exploring coalition building with Hamas the PFLP pursued its oppositional agenda, its need to preserve or regain influence within Palestinian institutions prevented a total disengagement from the PLO/PNA leadership. Ultimately, the opposition-integration dilemma, and the fluctuating policies it engendered, made both the PFLP's opposition and partnership in the institutional framework marginal within Palestinian politics.

The PFLP's difficulties in addressing such underlying contradictions also affected its position towards its key regional partner during the 1980s, namely the Syrian regime. Again, the priorities of counterbalancing Arafat's agenda pushed the PFLP closer to Damascus and its Palestinian proxies in terms of narrative and positions adopted. Nonetheless, the clear Syrian attempt to assert its control over the PLO compromised the effective establishment of a radical axis. The prevailing principle of defending Palestinian autonomy led to the PFLP's alignment with fellow Palestinian factions when PLO-Syria tensions exacerbated.

Policy fluctuation 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 national movement in the OPT displayed significant differences in terms of organisational structure and political strategies. The presence of the Israeli occupier entailed the development of underground political activities, the formation of a flexible, less hierarchical leadership as well as the prioritisation of non-violent political mobilisations over armed struggle. Differences were also due to the specific dynamics that fostered the development of the outside and the inside national movement. In the diaspora, popular mobilisation was the result of the PLO's performance of its quasi-state functions that accentuated the bureaucratisation of popular organisations. Conversely, in the OPT such mobilisation stemmed from collective actions and from the need to rely on popular political and economic support in the absence of a leadership providing funds and political legitimisation through its bureaucracy.[3] Moreover, the special status of the OPT, and their primacy after the end of the PLO quasi-state in Lebanon, lent to the local national movement a relevance that any other Palestinian diaspora community did not enjoy. Therefore, the peculiar features and circumstances marking the movement in the OPT entailed the emergence of

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[3] For more details on this see: Jamil Hilal, "PLO Insitutions. The Challenge Ahead", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 1 (1993): 46-60.

an 'inside-outside' divide influencing the internal dimension of the main PLO factions. Although the OPT branches recognised the leadership of the exiled cadres, their rise to prominence represented a potential challenge to the balances of power both on the factional and the PLO level.

In the PFLP's case, the 'inside-outside' divide first arose in relation to its policy line. Thus, the inside, younger leadership supporting a tougher position towards Fatah's attempts to exploit the uprising diplomatically, clashed with the outside, old-guard's unwillingness to provoke a major split within the PLO. In this case, the opposition-integration dilemma overlapped with the inside-outside divide, evidencing the PFLP leadership's interest in preserving both its grip on the Front as well as the influence and benefits granted by participation in the PLO institutions. Both these priorities coincided with maintaining the cohesiveness of the outside national unity. This came to the detriment of the oppositional agenda, particularly in the terms spelled out by the local leadership, resulting in the reiteration of policy fluctuation between an official objection to Arafat's strategy and the continued engagement with it. The inside-outside divide within the PFLP resurfaced throughout the phase that followed the First Intifada, especially with the advent of the post-Oslo era and of the PNA's state-building project. Indeed, in its various resurfacings, for instance during the PFLP's Fifth General Congress or the first PNA parliamentary elections, the divide continued to interact with the opposition-integration dilemma, undermining the PFLP's strength as an opposition force and its overall stance within a changing political environment.

Finally, the investigation of the opposition-integration dilemma allows the delineation of a different understanding of the PLO and its principal successor, the PNA. While for much of its history the PLO represented for the PFLP a vital political, institutional and economic framework, when its process of decline experienced a qualitative change after the loss of the Beirut base, such a framework also imposed major constraints. The PFLP's reduced political weight, coupled with the gradual centralisation of power into Arafat's hands, turned the PLO into a paradoxical framework. On the one hand, the PFLP was unwilling to disengage from the PLO as it acted to preserve the political

influence developed by virtue of its membership. On the other, the centralisation and personification of power in Arafat's leadership undermined both the effectiveness and the credibility of the PFLP's opposition within the PLO institutions, particularly as the PLO emerged as a nationalist and institutional support for the Fatah's leadership policies. Despite the official rejection of the PNA as a product of the Oslo accords, the PFLP entered into a similar relationship with it due to the overlap between PLO and PNA, and this latter emergence as the new main framework of the Palestinian national movement.

Literature Review, First Part: The PFLP in Scholarly Literature.

Despite the prominent role it has played within the Palestinian national movement and the PLO, the PFLP has rarely been the main focus of academic studies. The majority of works on Palestinian politics put Fatah, the PLO and, subsequently, the PNA's leadership at the centre of their analyses. The literature on Palestinian politics thus covers a number of aspects concerning the Palestinian leadership, such as its social composition, its functioning and evolution, or its relations with both hostile and friendly regional and international actors. Besides this, the growth of academic interest in political Islam, in particular since the early 1990s, has led to the production of several works covering the Palestinian Islamist organisations.

The following review of the relevant literature shows the need for a study addressing the third political trend in the Palestinian political field, namely the leftist and Marxist one. Therefore, this thesis should be considered within the context of academic works addressing the evolution of the Palestinian national movement, as it developed since the emergence of independent Palestinian organisations in the late 1960s. By virtue of its focus on the PFLP, the present study represents a contribution to the literature approaching the role of Marxism not only in Palestinian politics but also in the whole region. This is ensured through the reappraisal of the role played by ideology in the PFLP as well as through the analysis of the PFLP's participation in multi-faceted political and institutional frameworks. Thus, the main concepts spelled throughout this thesis may represent some effective analytical tool to scrutinise the agency of Marxist

and leftist forces in the context of national liberation. This first section of the review addresses the relevant scholarship produced on the Palestinian national movement highlighting its missing points concerning the PFLP and how the present thesis aims at approaching them. The subsequent section surveys part of the literature on Egyptian communism in order to outline the potential connections of the PFLP's case.

To date, only two academic studies treated the PFLP as their main subject. The first example is a 1987 article by Asʿad AbuKhalil which addressed the PFLP's decision-making process and its contradictions. The article focused on the internal factors that shaped the PFLP's policies, such as doctrinal background, internal power groups, or the preponderance of George Habash's personality in the decision-making process. More interestingly, AbuKhalil evidenced the concept of fluctuations in the PFLP's policy orientation, as a consequence of those different factors influencing the PFLP's agency. According to him, policy fluctuation emerged with particular clarity in the PFLP's shifting foreign relations. After his survey, AbuKhalil concluded that it might be difficult to determine whether the PFLP's fluctuant policy orientations and the moderation of its stand on several issues, stemmed from internal or external factors. What he stressed, is that such moderation, amounting to an abandonment of its founding, revolutionary principles, would likely provoke a deep crisis within the Popular Front.[4] The present study draws from the concept of policy fluctuation and expands it chronologically by observing it throughout the period under scrutiny. Moreover, the discussion presented in this thesis develops such concept through the identification of more factors contributing to this phenomenon. This elaboration, allowed the outline of those problems affecting the PFLP's agency, that beyond the issue of moderation, played a major role in the crisis that AbuKhalil correctly predicted.

The only published monograph focusing on the PFLP so far is Harold M. Cubert's *The PFLP's Changing Role in the Middle East*, published in 1997. This study, after long overviews on the development of Arab nationalism and regional

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[4] Asʿad AbuKhalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 361–78.

history, argues that the reason for the PFLP's failure to take the lead in the Palestinian national movement lies in its doctrinal rigidity, as opposed to Fatah's successful pragmatism. According to Cubert, such rigidity produced a political discourse that found little resonance among the Palestinian public as well as preventing the PFLP from implementing the needed changes in its political line. This ultimately produced the PFLP's marginalisation within the Palestinian national movement. Nonetheless the author displays little consideration of paramount aspects such as the evolution of the scenarios in which the PFLP acted, the internal dynamics that characterised both the PFLP and the PLO, as well as the actual role of ideology within the Front.[5] In sum, this book does not address those tensions and dynamics that the present thesis aims at outlining. In relation to the PFLP's ideological setting, for instance, this thesis shows that doctrinal inflexibility and the undisputed adherence to Marxist-Leninist and Maoist principles served as theoretical foundations and instruments to justify change in policy formulation and lower the impact of contradictory shifts. Moreover, thanks to the historical perspective adopted herein, it is possible to underline the various circumstances during which the PFLP displayed significant pragmatism, conversely from what Cubert argued in his book. This challenges the conclusion that the PFLP's 'inflexibility' determined its marginalisation within Palestinian politics and points to shortcomings in its agency as a prominent cause for the weakening process

The organisation from which the PFLP originated, the Pan-Arab and transnational Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), has received wider, although mostly outdated, scholarly attention. Such works mainly focus on the ideological evolution of the movement that started as a rightist, nationalist movement in the early 1950s but gradually shifted towards socialism, first by virtue of its association with Nasser's Egypt in the 1960s, and finally was transformed into a Marxist-Leninist organisation after the 1967 June War and the creation of the PFLP. In the account of the ANM's process of radicalisation, the literature stresses the influence of regional developments and particularly the ANM's failure to seize power in the Arab east, exception made for South Yemen, as a

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[5] Harold M. Cubert, *The PFLP's Changing Role in the Middle East* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

catalyst for the shift towards Marxism. Moreover, what is highlighted, is the legacy of the ANM in terms of ideological development of Arab nationalism and training of political leaders in several countries.[6] Great relevance is also devoted to internal trends and rivalries within the ANM as well as to the position of its main leaders, such as George Habash, Hani al-Hindi, Mohsen Ibrahim and Nayef Hawatmeh. These insights on the ANM's internal dynamics appear particularly important as they shed light on those factors that caused the early splits within the PFLP, above all the creation of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) in 1969. Thus, the mixture of ideological divergences and personal rivalries is highlighted to explain the ANM's internal rifts. Furthermore, such works allow us to grasp the ANM's ideological legacy within the PFLP, evident in the PFLP's rejection of political settlements of the Arab-Israeli conflict during its first decade as well as in its adherence to Pan-Arabism. In general terms, the literature focusing on the ANM provides the essential, comprehensive background to an informed study of its main offshoot and its relation with the rest of the PLO Left. In light of these thorough readings of the ANM's course, a similar take on the PFLP appears all the more needed to expand the academic knowledge on a central core of the Palestinian national movement.[7]

Recently, the Palestine Regional Office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, a 'political education' institution affiliated to the German leftist party *Die Linke*, has sponsored some studies on the Palestinian and Arab Left which clearly address the condition of the PFLP. As the whole Palestinian Left today appears marginalised, these works focused on the main reasons determining such decline. The great international and regional changes which occurred throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s are identified as prominent causes behind the weakening of the Palestinian Left. The crisis of global Marxism following the

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[6] Walid Kazziha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and His Comrades from Nationalism to Marxism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975); Muhammad Jamal Barut, *Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-ʿArab: al-Nashʾa, al-Tatawwur, al-Masaʾir (The Arab Nationalist Movement: Formation, Evolution and Trajectories)"* (Damascus: al-Markaz al-ʿArabi li-l-Dirasat al-Istratijiyya, 1997).

[7] Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976); Basil Al-Kubeisi, *Storia Del Movimento Dei Nazionalisti Arabi* (Milano: Jaca Books, 1977); Helga Baumgarten, "The Three Faces / Phases of Palestinian Nationalism , 1948 – 2005," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 4 (2005): 25–48.

demise of the USSR, the emergence of political Islam in the national and regional arenas, and the economic crisis that affected the PLO in the early 1990s are all events that had a negative impact on the whole Palestinian Left. On the Palestinian level, these works identify factors such as the advent of the Oslo era, the persistent fragmentation of the Palestinian Left as well as its lack of leadership renewal, its negligence concerning social issues and the Left's controversial relation with NGOs in the OPT as the principal causes for its protracted marginalisation in Palestinian politics.[8] In the literature approaching the issue of the PFLP's decline, ideological inflexibility is also a recurrent theme. Its strict adherence to Marxist-Leninism is often seen as a major factor that historically prevented the PFLP from gaining widespread mass support among the Palestinian population.[9] In addition, the PFLP's lack of renewal following the collapse of the USSR is also evidenced as a controversial point, posing further obstacles in the path towards political renewal. Indeed, the PFLP is highlighted as the only Palestinian leftist faction that did not undertake some form of ideological renewal, although the measures that other organisations adopted in this sense are often described as being of little effectiveness concerning popular attractiveness and mostly formal, without any substantial effects, particularly concerning their organisational structures.[10]

The factors outlined in these works are all fundamental to understand the decline and the current marginalisation of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left. Nonetheless, the majority of these studies does not put these events into historical perspective and tend to approach the matter starting from the demise of the Soviet Union and the advent of the Oslo era. Moreover, the literature tends to address the Palestinian Left as a fully homogenous group, despite some

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[8] Jamil Hilal, *Al-Yasar Al-Filastini. Ila ʾAyna? (The Palestinian Left. Where To?)* (Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2009); Hasan Ladadwe, "Al-Yasar al-Filastini: al-Waqiʿ wa al-Tahaddi (The Palestinian Left: Realities and Challenge)," in *Itlala Awalliyya ʿala al-Yasar fi-l-Mashriq al-ʿArabi (Mapping of the Arab Left. Contemporary Leftist Politics in the Arab East)*, ed. Jamil Hilal and Katia Herman (Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2014); Tariq Dana, "Social Struggle and the Crisis of the Palestinian Left Parties," *Pal Papers,* March (2016): 1–4.

[9] Ali Jarbawi, "Palestinian Politics at a Crossroads," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 4 (1996): 29–39.

[10] Salim Tamari, "Left in Limbo : Leninist Heritage and Islamist Challenge A," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 179 (1992): 16–21; Mahir Sharif, "From Marxism to Liberal Nationalism: A Transformation in Palestinian Marxism," in *Post-Marxism and the Middle East* ed. Faleh A. Jaber (London: Saqi Books, 1997).

important differences characterising each faction. Conversely, the present study argues that prominent causes contributing to the PFLP's decline emerged before the 1990s. In addition, although the importance of global and local developments cannot be underestimated, the literature still lacks an evaluation of the PFLP's own agency, of its response to such challenges. What is missing is a definition of the subjective aspects that shaped the PFLP's policies and led to given results. Assessments of the PFLP's agency have been attempted concerning some specific episodes of Palestinian political history such as the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 or the 2006 PLC elections in which the PFLP decided to take part.[11] Although extremely helpful to an understanding of the PFLP's policies in such circumscribed cases, these analyses need to be expanded and read against a wider and more comprehensive investigation of the PFLP's agency.

The wide corpus of literature on the PLO mostly focus on Fatah, its most important faction in terms of power within Palestinian institutions, popular following, military capabilities and international networks. More precisely, as Fatah and the ruling group around Arafat consistently held the reins of decision-making, scholarly attention focuses on Fatah's pursuit of its agenda through the PLO.[12] Although they do not depict a monolithic picture of the PLO that does not reflect the variegated nature of the Palestinian national movement,[13] nonetheless these works do not investigate sufficiently the main factors that shaped the PFLP's opposition to Fatah and the PLO leadership. In particular, the PFLP's rejection of Fatah's diplomatic strategy, in all of its embodiments throughout history, is underscored as a main source of tension between the two

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[11] See for instance Anders Strinberg, "The Damascus-Based Alliance of Palestinian Forces: A Primer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 60–76; Manal A. Jamal, "Beyond Fateh Corruption and Mass Discontent: Hamas, the Palestinian Left and the 2006 Legislative Elections," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (July 2013): 273–94.

[12] Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); F. Robert Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991); Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1997); Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage. The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubblication, 2007).

[13] Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, *La Mosaïque Éclatée. Une Histoire Du Mouvement National Palestinien (1993-2016)* (Paris - Beirut: Actes Sud -Institut des Etudes Palestiniennes, 2016). This book for instance, provides a detailed overview of the actors and themes that animate Palestinian politics in the OPT, Israel as well as the Palestinian diaspora with precious insights on the Palestinian national movement in Lebanon and Israel.

main PLO factions.[14] The PFLP's doctrinal rigidity is often highlighted in opposition to Fatah's pragmatism and ideological inclusiveness, for instance when analysing the debate on the form of the future Palestinian state that animated the PLO after the armed organisations took over in the late 1960s.[15] Ultimately, studies on the PLO underline the implications that the PLO, as an umbrella organisation, its internal opposition and its external competitors had on the Fatah's leadership of the organisation and its agenda. The stress is thus on the restraining power that such effect had on the PLO leadership.[16] Conversely, this study aims at evidencing the implications that PLO membership had for the PFLP thus delineating how such membership influenced the PFLP's conduct and to what extent it represented a constraint besides offering significant benefits.

Similarly, studies covering the post-Oslo period looked significantly at the agency of the Palestinian leadership within the context of the newly-established PNA. Attention is thus focused on how the PNA asserted its rule in the OPT and tried to sustain its state-building process in the realms of economy, legislation, security and judiciary. The careful assessment of PNA-implemented policies parallels a detailed discussion of the main critical aspects and dysfunctions affecting Palestinian self-government. Issues such as power centralisation and authoritarian practices, patrimonialism and corruption emerge among the main problematic aspects that affected PNA governance, influenced by both the legacy of Arafat's leadership within the PLO and the paradigms of the Oslo accords such as dependence on foreign aid and security coordination with Israel.[17]

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[14] Muhammad Muslih, "Moderates and Rejectionists within the Palestine Liberation Organization," *Middle East Journal* 30, no. 2 (1976): 127–40; Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle without: The Transformation of PLO Politics since 1982," *International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (1989).

[15] See for instance Alain Gresh, *The PLO. The Struggle Within* (London: Zed Books, 1988).

[16] Emile F. Sahliyeh, *The PLO after the Lebanon War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986); Rex Brynen, *Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon,* (Boulder: Westview Press,) 1990, http://prrn.mcgill.ca/research/papers/brynen2.htm.

[17] Nathan J. Brown, *Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Mushtaq Husain Khan, George Giacaman, and Inge Amundsen, eds., *State Formation in Palestine : Viability and Governance during a Social Transformation,* (London : Routledge, 2004); Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); Asʿad Ghanem, *Palestinian Politics after Arafat. A Failed National Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

Therefore, this part of the literature draws a detailed description of post-Oslo Palestinian politics which is central to understanding the new dilemmas affecting the PFLP's political action. In observing the post-Oslo phase, the present study focuses again on the PFLP's agency within the new political context. Particular stress is put on the constraints that the PFLP faced in its opposition to a political entity that embodied the direct successor, and to a certain extent the substitute, of the PLO. Ultimately, the goal is to outline how the effectiveness of the PFLP's policies was compromised by its unclear relation with the PNA's institutional framework. In so doing, this study adds to the academic discussion on the Palestinian Left's problematics and shortcomings during the Oslo era, particularly in the realm of civil society and NGOs,[18] and its contradictory position towards the PNA as a central theme in understanding its decline.

Since its establishment and rise to prominence, Hamas has also been at the centre of academic studies focusing on Palestinian politics. To date a remarkable corpus of literature on the Islamist movement has been produced, analysing the innovations it brought to the Palestinian national movement in terms of ideology and social practice as well as military and political strategy.[19] Consequently, such academic production has clarified Hamas' internal functioning and dynamics such as the relation between the exiled and the Gaza-based leaderships, its evolution from opposition movement to ruling party, as well as its successful pragmatism in engaging with the Oslo-derived political system. In particular, the literature seems to agree on Hamas' trail towards *de-facto* moderation, an idea confirmed by the new charter that Hamas issued in spring 2017.[20] Beside Hamas, academic literature has also dedicated specific attention

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[18] Rema Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics," *Race & Class* 37, no. 51 (1995): 51–63; Rema Hammami, "Palestinian NGOs since Oslo: From NGOs Politics to Social Movements?," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 214 (2000): 16–19; Islah Jad, "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements.," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4 (2007): 622–29; Benoit Challand, "A Nahda of Charitable Organizations? Health Service Provision and the Politics of Aid in Palestine," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 2 (2008): 227–47.

[19] To quote some of the most prominent Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996); Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000); Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrel, *Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Sara Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza Engaging the Islamist Social Sector.* (Princeton: Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2011).

[20] Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya-Hamas, *"Wathiqat al-Mabadiʾ wa al-Siyasat al-ʿama (Charter of Principles and General Policies)",* may, 2017.

to the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (Islamic Jihad), evidencing the diversities of Palestinian political Islam. Specifically in relation to Islamic Jihad, some peculiar traits are often highlighted. Its evolution as the gathering of different groups coalescing around the personality of Fathi Shiqaqi as well as the organisation's explicit retention of the Palestinian national movement's legacy, in contrast with Hamas' challenge to it, emerge as the Islamic Jihad's most important features.[21] As a consequence, this body of literature on the main Palestinian Islamist factions further highlights the lack of a study dedicated to the historical development of the main Palestinian leftist faction. Nonetheless, the methodology employed to investigate the Islamist organisations represents a reference model for the present study of the PFLP. Particularly valuable was the recourse of these works to the combination of official documents and interviews with members and cadres as primary sources.

Relying on the profiles of Palestinian political Islam detailed in the literature, this study engages with the relations between the PFLP and the Islamist faction. While Islamist-focused studies point to some of the divergences that jeopardised the attempts at contact with leftist factions, an approach centred on the PFLP's view allows us to outline a more complete image. Besides ideological differences which are usually put forward as a main divide, the different understanding of Palestinian institutions, especially the PLO, emerges as the major point of fissure between the Left and the Islamists, Hamas in particular. In conclusion, beside addressing the division between the Islamist and the leftist opposition to Fatah and the PNA, the present study highlights the PFLP's predicament in preserving its political role while a new radical actor embodied the main opposition option.

As it has been shown, the focused study of the PFLP's decline aims at complementing the scholarship on the Palestinian national movement on several issues. Not only the most urgent goal of providing a comprehensive analysis of the PFLP's marginalisation is therefore addressed. This study also proceeds to

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[21] Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2001); Wissam Alhaj, Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, and Eugénie Rebillard, *De La Théologie À La Liberation? Histoire Du Jihad Islamique Palestinien* (Paris: La Découvert, 2014).

the reappraisal of ideology in the Popular Front, intra-factional relations and the role of Palestinian institutions contributing to a more complete depiction of the internal dynamics characterising the Palestinian national movement.

Literature Review, Second Part: The Opposition-Integration Dilemma beyond Palestine.

The participation of Marxist-Leninist forces in nationalist fronts or umbrella organisations aiming at national liberation was not a Palestinian prerogative in the Middle East and North Africa region. Therefore, the problems and challenges arising from such participation can be observed in other cases too. One of the main recurrent aspects is the alternation of conflict and cooperation between the leftist forces and the nationalist, and often military, leadership of the national movements. This echoes the concept of opposition-integration dilemma that affected severely the PFLP. Hence, the concepts elaborated in this thesis, can contribute to the study of intra-factional relations in different contexts. A look at the relevant literature, and in particular at the case of Egypt, help to demonstrate this point. The goal of this survey is thus to underscore the potential interactions between different national cases, and more specifically, the connections of the Palestinian case to other realities despite its own peculiarities.

The relations between Egyptian communists and nationalist forces provide a first viable example. The difficult position of Egyptian communism towards nationalism emerges as a central aspect in the literature. This first took the shapes of an ideological dilemma on whether Egyptian communists should prioritise class struggle, and the internationalist approach that ensued, or the national struggle against British imperialism. While the communist movement experienced both cooperation and repression at the hand of the Wafd Party, the leading nationalist force in Egypt, during the first half of the 20th century, it ultimately ended up by prioritising the national effort by the Second World War period. At this regard, the literature shows how such orientation spread not only among the cadres of communist factions but also among communist trade

unionists.[22] The dilemma exacerbated even more in the 1940s and 1950s, with the outbreak and conclusion of the 1948 Palestine war and the radicalisation of Egyptian nationalism due to the continual presence of British forces in the country. While support for the partition of Palestine, in alignment with Soviet official line, risked undermining the communists' nationalist credentials, a remarkable part of Egyptian Marxism came to look at nationalism as an effective mean to achieve the final goal of socialist revolution. As Joel Beinin outlines through his Gramscian approach, the communists tried to reach their political goals by participating in the hegemonic bloc headed by nationalist forces, notably Pan-Arabist after the Free Officers' takeover.[23] However, the literature highlights how the dilemma between conflict and cooperation with nationalist forces continued to affect Egyptian communism. Indeed, such dilemma fostered fragmentation among its different movements, a dynamic that can be observed also within the Palestinian national movement, albeit with the due distinctions. Part of the movement was actively involved in the organisation of the military seizure of power as well as supporting the new regime in its first months. A minority trend of Egyptian Marxist however, vehemently opposed the Free Officers, deeming their bourgeois and military character as ultimately reactionary. Nevertheless, the whole of Egyptian communism was reunited by Nasser's repression that hit all leftist factions with no distinctions.[24] In their study of Egyptian communism relations with nationalism, some works underline the benefit that nationalist forces enjoyed from such relations in contrast with the few advantages reaped by the communists. Indeed, not only the Marxist Left provided the Free Officers with organisational support during the preparation of their coup. Later on, Nasser was also to implement some points that have always been high in the communists' agenda such as nationalisations, land reforms and

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[22] Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile. Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988); Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism. Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution,* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011).
[23] Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948-1965,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990).
[24] Rami Ginat and Odelya Alon, "En Route to Revolution: The Communists and the Free Officers. Honeymoon and Separation", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016*),* 590–612.

closer ties with the USSR and the Socialist bloc countries. While testifying the Left's inability to take a leading role in the nationalist struggle, according to Selma Botman, this aspect proves the relevance of communist legacy in Egyptian politics.[25] Despite the repression endured, Egyptian communists continued to consider integration into the Nasserist regime even behind bars. Indeed, they continued to calculate that alliance with the nationalist forces would have brought the revolutionary change that they pursued. Nasser's economic and foreign policies, especially after 1956, provided strong support for this argument, while also Soviet recommendations supported this orientation. As a result, the two main communist parties in Egypt decided to dissolve themselves in 1965 to join the newly formed Arab Socialist Union, Nasser's regime single-party. The dissolution of independent communist organisation is not only interesting since it shows the ultimate choice of the Egyptian left for integration. As Beinin pointed out, this choice was not a mere consequence of Soviet diktats, but one taken in consideration of Egypt's own political circumstances.[26] The role of the communists' own calculation in leading towards dissolution thus underscores the importance of considering individual agency in the appraisal of specific political trajectories. The resolution of the dilemma between opposition and integration in favour of this latter, represents, in the Egyptian case, the result of a policy orientation that the communist movement followed autonomously for a long time. Therefore, internal determinants seem to acquire an equal, if not a greater role compared to external ones, in the evolution of the Egyptian communist movement.

The opposition-integration dilemma was central throughout the history of the PFLP's participation in the PLO and, as the previous sections outlined, it played a fundamental role in its process of marginalisation. Its case can thus be linked to that of Egyptian communists and possibly to other realities in the region and elsewhere such as Iraq and South Africa. In light of this, the present study provides the necessary discussion of leftist-nationalist relations within a specific

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[25] Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970,* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988); Selma Botman, "The Rise and Experience of Egyptian Communism: 1919-1952, *Studies in Comparative Communism* 28, no. 1 (1988), 49-66.
[26] Joel Beinin, "The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt", *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 4 (1987), 568-584.

movement for national liberation upon which possible comparisons can be based. Therefore, despite the peculiarities of the PFLP and the Palestinian cases, for instance the PFLP's own nationalist origins, the study of its case can be informative to analyses approaching other political and national contexts.

Primary Sources.

In the preface to his monumental study of the Palestinian national movement's quest for statehood, Yezid Sayigh points out the wide range of political documents published by all Palestinian factions and organisations, identifying in such production a fundamental source for his work:

> 'given the intense competition for adherents (and external backing), no guerrilla group was without at least one political weekly, and several also published their own soldiers' magazines, besides a variety of reports, yearbooks, and non-periodical statements or pamphlets containing texts of speeches and other public messages'.[27]

Official publications appear even more important when approaching the history of single factions as these documents not only represent the most constant source on each faction's actual agency, but also provide relevant information concerning the ideological and organisational background to a given set of policies. Khaled Hroub's study of Hamas' political thought and practice represents a prominent example of this approach concerning single Palestinian factions. As the author himself clarifies:

> 'the contribution of (this) study lies in its almost total reliance on primary sources, specifically, the unpublished as well as published documents and literature of Hamas'.[28]

The present study follows the examples provided above and therefore relies primarily on the PFLP's official documents. The best source for the PFLP's official publications is the magazine *Al-Hadaf*, founded in 1969 by prominent Palestinian author and PFLP member Ghassan Kanafani as the official party

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[27] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, XV.
[28] Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*, 6.

mouthpiece. *Al-Hadaf* has been published weekly for most of its life but it started to be issued monthly in 1995, probably due to financial problems. Today, the magazine does not exist in its printed edition anymore but continues to publish as an online news platform. The types of document that *Al-Hadaf* has been publishing since its establishment range from Politburo and Central Committee official statements and reports to declarations directly issued by the PFLP's leaders, from congress memoranda and resolutions to joint statements with other Palestinian, Arab and international organisations. Besides the whole range of official documents, *Al-Hadaf* also publishes interviews that the PFLP's leaders released in the magazine itself or to world media, besides analysis and columns that clarify the PFLP's position on the main issues at the centre of political debates.[29]

Al-Hadaf's editorial board was composed of top cadres who also held posts within the PFLP and the PLO such as Politburo members Sabi Mahi al-Din, Jawad ʿAql, Politburo and PNC member Omar Qattish, Maher al-Taher, Head of External Relations and the PFLP's representative in the PLO Executive Committee, or Bassam Abu Sharif, a close advisor to George Habash before his defection from the PFLP to Fatah in the late 1980s. Consequently, besides official statements and communiques, the majority of analytical and comment articles came directly from the higher ranks of the Front. Beside this, other top PFLP's officials also contributed frequently to *Al-Hadaf*. In particular, each official contributed to the magazine with explanatory pieces concerning his area of expertise, according to his post within either the PFLP or the PLO. Therefore, for instance, George Habash appeared in *Al-Hadaf* with both concise and lengthy illustrations of the general orientations of the PFLP's policies, how decisions and shifts were grounded in the nationalist and Marxist-Leninist background of the Front. As further examples, as long as Abu Ali Mustafa represented the PFLP within the PLO Executive Committee, he wrote *Al-Hadaf* articles illustrating the rationale for the PFLP's positions and votes in this key PLO institution, while

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[29] For instance, each number of *Al-Hadaf* opened for decades with the editorial entitled *Mawqifuna* (Our position), that summarised the PFLP's line on given issues.

Abu Ahmad Fuʾad, long time PFLP military head, provided clarifications and reports on the military activities of the Front.

Besides the PFLP's official voices, *Al-Hadaf* also featured contributions from Palestinian, Arab and international political personalities, intellectuals and journalists whose views could substantiate the PFLP's position or who addressed issues relevant for the Front on the national, regional and international levels. Moreover, interviews of and articles by representatives of other Palestinian factions as well as Arab and international state officials also appeared in *Al-Hadaf.* These kinds of contributions are telling for the evolution of the PFLP's relations with its partners. Thus, for instance, *Al-Hadaf* dedicated significant space to articles and interviews with the DFLP's members, especially Secretary-General Nayef Hawatmeh, when the two organisations pursued coalition building. As their association attempts experienced troubles or breakdowns, the DFLP's officials stopped appearing regularly in *Al-Hadaf.*

Al-Hadaf's complete collection is, to date, only available at the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, where a selection of relevant documents issued between 1982 and 2013 has been carried out for the purposes of the present research. In addition to the documents retrieved from *Al-Hadaf,* publications such as booklets, pamphlets or compiled volumes of official documents, issued by the PFLP's Information Department, have been employed extensively. These sources have been retrieved from various physical repositories and web sites such as the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies, the library of the Institut Français du Proche Orient (also based in the Lebanese capital) or the PFLP's affiliated webpages.[30]

Besides the PFLP's official literature, this study also drew important information from documents issued by the political platforms or umbrella organisations in which the PFLP participated, first and foremost the PLO, as well as those of its political partners such as other Palestinian factions. This set of material, too, ranging from resolutions and statements released by the PLO and the PNA institutions to documents relating to opposition coalitions, has been

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[30] The PFLP's official website: http://pflp.ps/ar/; and a newly-created online archive dedicated to the PFLP's official documents: http://pflp-documents.org/.

retrieved through several channels. The *Journal for Palestine Studies*, and specifically its dedicated section on primary sources, '*Documents and Source Material',* provided access to a wide range of documents related to Palestinian affairs while, for instance, the Palestinian News and Info Agency-Wafa, today the PNA's official press agency, provides valuable archival resources on Palestinian institutions and factions.

Besides textual primary sources, this research also relied on interviews with informed people, although to a lesser extent. Current and former PFLP members and cadres, as well as scholars specialised in the Palestinian national movement, have been consulted to gain insights on the PFLP's internal dynamics. Constraints related to the timing of the PhD studies as well as to the research and travel funds available led to the prioritisation of textual sources whose gathering process could be better defined in space and time.

The greater reliance on textual sources contributed to the definition of the chronological scope adopted in this study. Indeed, beside the significance of 2007 in relation to the PFLP's marginalisation process, the gradual reduction of official publications, as well as the decrease in their scope in terms of political analysis, supported the decision to conclude the historical survey with that episode. It is also worth remarking that due to the preference ascribed in this study to written sources, more attention has been paid to 'high level' politics within the PFLP rather than grassroots politics. Nonetheless, a parallel focus on the PFLP's middle cadres and militant base would make a valuable addition to this research. On the one hand, this would allow more insight into the PFLP's internal functioning, for instance concerning top-down and bottom-up communication. On the other, the exploration of the PFLP's grassroots politics would help to delineate the scope of the problematic aspects that the present study highlights concerning the Front's agency. While representing a limit of the present study, these aspects also hint at the possibility to further pursue this subject and line of research.

Note on the Use of Sources.

The identification of textual material as the principal source for this thesis 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 in the present study allowed a reconstruction of the evolution of the PFLP's policy line and narrative, while developing a deep understanding of the recurring elements marking its political agency. In particular, this approach enabled the detection of the PFLP's policy fluctuation through the comparison of the different positions adopted on sensitive issues. This aspect acquires further relevance as the PFLP acted in highly diversified political environments and on different levels, such as war-torn Lebanon or Israeli-occupied Palestine, within PLO institutions, and at a grassroots level. This not only entailed the production of a wide-ranging official literature to tackle all the levels in which the PFLP operated, but also facilitated the identification of inconsistencies and fluctuations in the PFLP's agency.

Moreover, the diachronic reading of the PFLP's literature has been combined with the synchronic reading of contemporary primary and secondary sources. More precisely, the information provided by the official documents has been assessed in the light of both the literature produced by other relevant actors, such as other Palestinian factions, regional and international governments or international institutions, and of the broad historiography available on the Palestinian national movement. This approach entailed reading the corpus of the PFLP's official documents 'against the historical background of the specific contingent situations, such as when they were written, and when and how they were used in time'.[31] Non-PFLP primary sources, and the relevant literature employed, provided such background thus allowing a more balanced assessment of the PFLP's actual agency and putting its rhetoric and propaganda in historical, spatial and political perspective. In other words, the PFLP's narrative, and the positions it expressed, have been compared directly with the narrative and the

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[31] Kristina Spohr Readman, "Memoranda," in *Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts From Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Zieman (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 128.

positions outlined in both other factions' literature and in the texts of accords, joint declarations and announcements that the PFLP either signed, supported or opposed. This allows us to comprehend and outline on the one hand the PFLP's interpretation and views over the main issues at stake for the Front itself and the whole national movement. On the other, this approach enables us to highlight the PFLP's use of rhetoric, the adaption of external official documents to its own narrative and political line and, more importantly, the PFLP's inconsistencies dictated by the multiples sources of pressure and dilemmas. This reading method was particularly useful, for instance, in the analysis of the PFLP's policies in the context of the mid-1980s PLO split over Arafat's diplomatic strategy and rapprochement with Jordan and Egypt. The survey of a wide range of documents rendered the evolution of the PFLP's line, from moderate opposition to the PLO Chairman, passing through the exacerbation of tensions with the Fatah's leadership to reconciliation in less than a five-year time span. In addition, it permits an outline of the diverse set of interpretations at the origins of the political conflict within the national movement. The PFLP's opposition strategy was thus analysed against the DFLP's softer criticism of Arafat or the Fatah defectors' justification of their armed rebellion.

The recourse to this approach mitigated the propagandistic character of the primary sources employed. More precisely, the double synchronic and diachronic reading of primary and secondary sources tackled the risk of excessively rendering party narrative to the detriment of the critical and analytical dimension of the study. In this context, the extensive space dedicated to the PFLP's narrative does not aim at merely reproducing its rhetoric. The goal is to show how the PFLP's political discourse accompanied its policy production, how ideology was adapted to support decision-making. In doing so, this thesis challenges common views that consider the PFLP's policies as mainly dependent on its political doctrine and problematises the relations between ideological basis and actual policy production.

Oral sources too were useful in balancing the rhetorical and propagandistic character of official literature. Moreover, interviews filled some of the gaps that textual sources left, and helped in challenging and evaluating the conclusions

drawn from the texts. The recourse to oral sources also contributed to obviating the unavailability of the PFLP's internal archives. Indeed, 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. This approach allowed this study to have an indicative, yet founded, idea on internal power shifts. Oral sources also contradicted in some instances the information gathered from official publication. This was particularly useful to highlight internal divisions and tensions that the textual sources tended to overlook. Interviews were run following a 'semi-structured' model, implying that 'key themes of the interview' were previously identified and successively 'formulated as key questions'.[32] In practical terms, a rough plan of each interview was prepared according to the profile of the interviewee. This did not entail a strict adherence to the plan, as a flexible approach ensured more familiarity with the interviewee who in turn would be more likely to disclose the desired details. Furthermore, an interviewee-led conversation might result in unexpected, yet valuable, information. 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.

Structure of the Study.

This study follows a general chronological order to keep track of the main developments affecting the Palestinian national movement while observing the persistence of the PFLP's policy fluctuation over the time. The themes marking the PFLP's political agency, such as opposition to Arafat's diplomatic strategy and adherence to Palestinian institutions, appear constant throughout the period under scrutiny. Therefore, by adopting a chronological approach, the present thesis manages on the one hand to follow and outline the evolution of the

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[32] William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 2009), 6.

political environments in which the PFLP operated over the time. On the other, this approach allows me to highlight the persistence of the most significant elements shaping the PFLP's agency and generating the policy fluctuation pattern. While stressing the resurfacing of some central factors, the chronological order enables the analysis to outline the specificities that these dynamics displayed in the different historical phases. As a result, the reliance on chronology facilitates the comprehension of the main dynamics underway all through the period covered in this thesis.

The first two chapters address the years between late 1982 up to late 1987 during which the PLO experienced its first major internal split. The first chapter focuses on the PFLP's agenda towards the PLO internal situation. Its main goal being countering Fatah, and specifically Arafat's intention to start a dialogue with the US and its allies in the region, the PFLP aimed at building a 'radical' alternative, opposed to US-sponsored peace talks and based on an alliance of Palestinian leftist forces. The second chapter addresses the regional and international dimension of the PFLP's agenda in the middle 1980s. After the relocation of its headquarter in Damascus as well as due to Syrian opposition to a US conflict settlement plan, the PFLP found in the Assad regime its main regional partner. By the same token, a strengthening of ties between the PLO opposition and the USSR emerged as a PFLP priority to counterbalance Arafat's drift towards Washington. Nevertheless, 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 priorities stemming from the rejection of Arafat's diplomatic strategy and the creation of an opposition coalition, and those deriving from its factional calculations and Syrian pressures. The USSR's disengagement from the Arab-Israeli conflict and its late rapprochement with Israel further undermined the PFLP's agency and narrative. As a result, the PFLP did not play a major role in the final failure of Arafat's strategy nor was it able to limit his growing power within the PLO. This marked a first major step in the PFLP's marginalisation although the next phase presented some chances of revival.

The third chapter covers the first half of the First Intifada which exploded in December 1987 as well as the preceding entrenchment of the PLO factions in the OPT. For the PFLP, the different and more favourable political balance existing among the Palestinian factions in the OPT as well as the recovered unity of the PLO was a valuable chance to invert its marginalisation process and reassert its role 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, are some of the sources of pressure behind the PFLP's fluctuations during this phase.

The fourth chapter tackles 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 of the post-Oslo political regime to its acceptance underscored by Abu Ali Mustafa's return to the OPT. The first sections cover the PFLP's predicament in relation to the 1991 Gulf War and the downfall of the USSR as well as its shortcomings in attaining genuine party renewal. Afterwards, the focus shifts towards the PFLP's attempts to form an opposition coalition to delegitimise the Oslo accords. What is stressed is the PFLP's interest in acting on the institutional level and the tensions with other coalition associates, particularly Islamists. While addressing the contradictions stemming from the PFLP's political orientations, the fourth chapters ultimately addresses the failure of its agenda and the ensuing efforts to reconcile with Fatah, accepting *de-facto* the post-Oslo political system

The fifth and last chapter tackles the years that asserted the PFLP's marginalisation as the unfolding of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, beginning in 2000, and the evolution of the Hamas-Fatah split between 2006 and 2007 demonstrated. In covering the Al-Aqsa Intifada, this chapter outlines the PFLP's fluctuations and loss of relevance in relations 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. After fully accepting the Oslo institutions, testified by its participation in the 2005 presidential and the 2006 parliamentary elections, the PFLP struggled to maintain an active role in the heightened competition between Hamas and Fatah. In the conflict that followed Hamas' victory in the 2006 elections, the PFLP oscillated between the two sides, ultimately demonstrating the primacy of integration into the PLO/PNA framework above other priorities. Ultimately, the PFLP's inability to disengage from a dysfunctional institutional framework is stressed as the main dysfunctional character still affecting its 'internal opposition'. Hence, this thesis questions in conclusion the actual role of the PFLP within the Palestinian national movement, casting serious doubts on a revival of the Palestinian Left within the framework of its traditional, main representative.

Chapter 1. - After the Loss of Beirut: Years of Split.[1]

Introduction

This chapter analyses the PFLP's conduct during the critical period of split within the PLO that started in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and lasted until full reconciliation was achieved in early 1987. Before plunging into the issue of the PFLP's policies in the mid-1980s, a historical, ideological and organisational background to the Popular Front is provided. This aims at outlining some underlying principles and dynamics that influenced the PFLP's agency since its establishment and that remerged consistently in the post-Beirut phase up to the present day.

Between 1982 and 1987, the PFLP's goal was to create a 'radical alternative' to the diplomatic strategy that PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat was pursuing. To counter Fatah's project of political coordination with Jordan and rapprochement with Egypt and, more broadly, with the US, the Popular Front made several attempts to create an opposition coalition to unite the Palestinian Left and, in general, all those forces opposed to the new course on which the PLO leadership was embarked.

After clarifying the roots and the factors influencing the PFLP's formulation of its own agenda at the beginning of this phase on the Palestinian level, the different sections of this chapter cover the evolution of the PFLP's position within Palestinian internal politics according to the developments undergone by the PLO in this five-year period. In particular, what is stressed is the emergence of the opposition-integration dilemma and the related policy fluctuation pattern affecting the PFLP's agency. For instance, these features appeared clearly in the PFLP's repeated efforts to build a coalition to counterbalance Arafat's growing centralism and his diplomatic agenda. At the same time, the PFLP's gradual estrangement from Fatah, linked and proportionate to the PLO Chairman's

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[1] Part of the issues outlined in this chapter are also featured in the following publication: Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "'Coalition Politics' and Regional Steadfastness: The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Between 1983 and 1984", *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 50, 2014, 75-96.

pursuit of his goals, testified to a constant interest in maintaining PLO unity, notwithstanding the feuds dividing its factions.

In addition, this chapter also addresses the other sources of tensions that concurred to the production of policy fluctuation. In this regard, the PFLP's relations, and, especially, its differences with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) over the line of opposition to Fatah played a central role. Similarly, the PFLP's loyalty to PLO autonomy of action appeared irreconcilable with other partners of its coalition building, namely the Syrian-affiliated Palestinian factions.

Ultimately, the analysis of the PFLP's conduct between 1982 and 1987 characterises this phase as a landmark in its marginalisation process. However, the processual character of such decline ensured that at this stage the PFLP was able to retain some of its political weight and, despite its inability to restrain Arafat's policies, significant popular support. In particular, the PFLP's adherence to the PLO framework played to its advantage while in the subsequent phases, such adherence became more problematic.

Finally, while this chapter focuses on the PFLP's action in the context of internal Palestinian conflict, the next one will examine the PFLP's agency vis-à-vis the Arab environments in which it operated, its stand and narrative concerning the Soviet Union, and how the PFLP's action on this level contributed to undermine its goals as much as its limits within the Palestinian scenario.

The PFLP's Ideological and Organisational Background.

This introductory section illustrates the ideological and organisational principles upon which the PFLP's political agency was based. In fact, the outline of these aspects is fundamental to understand the 'functioning' of such agency after 1982.

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. The PFLP thus resulted from the merger of several organisations linked to the ANM such as the National Front for the Liberation of Palestine (NFLP) with previously autonomous factions such as the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). The PFLP was set up following the June 1967 war that saw Israel conquering the remaining parts of mandatory Palestine.[2] 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, aimed at leading the struggle against Israel, resorting to guerrilla warfare as the main mean of action. Contrary to events since the 1948 Nakba, the mass expulsion of Palestinians following the first Arab-Israeli war, independent Palestinian action was to be at the forefront of the effort to liberate Palestine, as the Arab nationalist regimes had demonstrated their inability and unwillingness to achieve liberation and return for the Palestinians.[3] In this context, the Palestinian armed organisations, and Fatah in particular, started to aim at taking over the PLO. In fact, the PLO had been established in 1964 following an Arab summit summoned in Cairo at the initiative of Egyptian President Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser. In the conception of the Arab Heads of State, 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 for 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

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[2] Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin, "Al-Bayan al-Taʾsisi al-Awwal li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (The Founding Statement of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine)" December 11, 1967, accessed on January 9, 2017, http://pflp-documents.org/documents/PFLP-FoundingStatementArabic1967.pdf; Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 143–144.
[3] Paul Thomas Chamberlain, *The Global Offensive. The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19–24.

increasing exponentially. Consequently, Fatah and the other factions managed first to earn PLO recognition during the 4th 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.[4]

The PFLP adopted Marxist-Leninism as official political doctrine in 1969 during its Second General Congress, in what represented the final step of the ANM's transition from 1950s right-wing nationalism towards the radical left.[5] 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'.[6] 'Democratic centralism' regulated party discipline and relations between the different bodies of the Front. 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.[7]

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 indeed, on the whole Palestinian national movement in the late 1960s. At the time, 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

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[4] Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation,*28-29, 41-44.
[5] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 232.
[6] Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin, "Al-Nizam al-Dakhili (Internal Structure)," 1971, 6–7.
[7] Ibid., 31–40.

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 Marxist-Leninism, thus realising the necessary preconditions for a mass-based popular war.[8]

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 priority 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.[9] 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 of America, 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 Nasserite 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 Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc countries, the main sponsors of global national liberation movements, as well as with those movements themselves.[10]

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.[11] Among these operations,

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[8] "Al-Fikr al-ʿAskari li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (The Military Doctrine of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine)" (Beirut: Kitab al-Hadaf, 1970), 9–12; 27–30.
[9] Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin, "*Al-Istratijiyya Al-Siyasiyya wa al-Tanzimiyya (Political and Organisational Strategy)* ", (PFLP Information Department, 1967), 14–18.
[10] Ibid., 6–45.
[11] Chamberlain, *The Global Offensive. The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order*, 172–174.

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 movement. However, 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.[12] 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 US. Consequently, this enabled revolutionary actors to strike 'imperialist interests' all over the world and strike the enemy 'in any place'.[13]

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 contributed to the debate that animated the whole Palestinian national movement in the late 1960s with its idea of creating a socialist state all over the Arab Levant. This vision of a unified Arab entity was coupled with ideas borrowed from the experience of the Vietnamese resistance against US aggression. Indeed, 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 which launched attacks against Israel from its soil.[14] 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'.[15]

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[12] On the Lod airport attack see Patricia G Steinhoff, "Portrait of a Terrorist: An Interview with Kozo Okamoto," *Asian Survey* 16, no. 9 (1976): 830–45.

[13] "Al-Jabha al-Shʿabiyya wa al-ʿAmaliyyat al-Kharijiyya (The PFLP and External Operations)," in *Munaqashat Kitab Al-Hadaf* (Beirut: Al-Hadaf, 1971), 1–4.

[14] "Al-Fikr al-ʿAskari li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (The Military Doctrine of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine)," 34–38.

[15] PFLP Information Department, *Palestine: Towards a Democratic Solution* (Beirut, 1970), 5–36.

The PFLP before 1982: Leftist Fragmentation and the Rivalry with Fatah.

This section sketches the PFLP's relations with the main Palestinian factions, evidencing both the development of intra-leftist fragmentation and the relations with the PLO's leading force, Fatah. The opposition to Fatah, while forging the PFLP's policies since its establishment, also produced a tension due to the Popular Front's participation in the common PLO platform. Such tension ultimately played a central role in influencing the PFLP's trajectory throughout the decades that followed the PLO eviction from Lebanon.

In its early years, the PFLP suffered several splits which created a number of splinter organisations. The fractures developed along the lines of the PFLP's internal currents 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 theory and disputes to which the PFLP lent higher importance. This dispute 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.[16] Beside this, the PF-GC's formation also evidenced 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

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[16] Helga Baumgarten, "The Three Faces/Phases of Palestinian Nationalism , 1948 – 2005," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 4 (2005): 27–28.

effective political actor within the national movement without direct Syrian patronage.[17]

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 caution in terms of military strategy. 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. Finally, the split reflected an internal power struggle as in the months leading to the formal split, the rightist leadership replaced the left 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, thus giving birth to the second leftist force within the PLO.[18] 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 their smaller numbers as well as the potential crackdown that could come from Habash's loyalists.[19] This pattern of action emerged repeatedly in the policies of the PLO Chairman and it deeply affected the whole PLO and Fatah itself. For

[17] Yezid Sayigh, "The Politics of Palestinian Exile," *Third World Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1987): 35.

[18] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 227–232.

[19] As'ad AbuKhalil, "George Habash and the Movement of Arab Nationalists : Neither Unity nor Liberation," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 4 (1999): 99–101.

instance, as will be shown in full details, Arafat took advantage of opposition divisions to bolster his nationalist stance in the face of external aggression in the mid-1980s. Moreover, he actively contributed to the fragmentation of Fatah and PLO structure by creating multiple agencies with equal or similar tasks at the economic, military and political levels of PLO and Fatah bureaucracy. This enabled him to foster rivalry among his subordinates, who competed for economic and political patronage, as well as to centralise the levers of power into his hands.[20]

The rivalry with Fatah consistently marked the PFLP's presence within the PLO as the two factions held opposed views on a number of core issues. Fatah (reverse acronym of *ḥarakat al-taḥrīr al-waṭanī al-filasṭīnī*- Palestinian National Liberation Movement) 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 lay in 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 action independent from Arab governments as well as prioritising, since its establishment, the pursuit of autonomous Palestinian institutions, thus anticipating the centrality of the search for statehood in its political agency.[21]

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. Despite their strong rivalry, Fatah and the PFLP had always been able to settle their differences politically. This was constantly the case from the early disputes on the allocation of factional seats within the PLO bodies in 1969-1970 up to the feud that divided the Palestinian factions in the mid-1980s. In that sense, a key

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[20] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993,* 455-460.
[21] Helga Baumgarten, "The Three Faces/Phases of Palestinian Nationalism, 1948–2005", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 4 (2005), 31-36.

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.[22] From the PFLP's perspective, this common ground with Fatah, on the one hand represented an instrument to constrain and influence the agenda of the leading Palestinian faction. On the other, 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. As a consequence, by mid-1968 Fatah fielded 2000 fighters in Jordan, by then the largest Palestinian base, out of a total of 3000 from all other factions. The PFLP for its part reached between 1000 and 1500 armed men only by 1970.[23] 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.[24]

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 3 seats in the PLO executive branch, while the PFLP, like other armed factions gained just 1 seat.[25] Furthermore, Arafat strengthened his authority over the PLO thanks to the support he enjoyed among independent

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[22] Alain Gresh, *The PLO. The Struggle Within* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 231–238; Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle without: The Transformation of PLO Politics since 1982," *International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (1989): 259–260.

[23] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 181–182.

[24] Hisham Sharabi, *Palestine Guerillas. Their Credility and Effectiveness.* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1970), 21.

[25] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 219.

members who assured their backing of his line in critical phases throughout his decades-long course as PLO Chairman.[26]

In terms of differences, the ideological background was a paramount aspect dividing Fatah and the PFLP. Indeed, the movement founded by Yasser Arafat did not rely on a proper ideological setting, a feature that fostered its wide popular appeal. In addition, its inclusive, non-ideological Palestinian nationalism enabled Fatah to build working relations with both the nationalist Arab republics and the conservative monarchies of the region. Conversely, the PFLP's adherence to Marxist-Leninism entailed an ideologically homogeneous membership, while its view of world politics excluded relations with 'reactionary' regimes, at least in the first phases of its life.[27] In fact, 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 established early relations with China which became a military supplier as early as in 1965.[28] Similarly, in 1973 Fatah became the first Palestinian partner of the USSR, 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.[29]

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

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[26] For instance, contacts with independent members were fundamental to secure his elections as Chairman in 1969 Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation*, 45–46.

[27] Ibid., 22–25; 195–200.

[28] Lillian Craig Harris, "China's Relations with the PLO," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 1 (1977): 123–124.

[29] Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 110–11.

in King Hussein's decision to evict militarily the PLO from his country's soil in September 1970.[30]

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 Points 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.[31] 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 UN General Assembly extended to Arafat, granting the PLO 'non-member observer status'.[32] The PFLP for its part refused to renounce 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'. In effect, 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

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[30] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 243–248.

[31] "Al-Dawra al-Thaniyya ʿAshara (The Twelfth Session)," *Wafa Info*, 1974, accessed January 9, 2017, http://info.wafa.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3789.

[32] United Nations General Assembly, "3210 (XXIX). Invitation to the Palestine Liberation Organization," 1974, accessed January 9, 2017, https://goo.gl/QQrvA6; United Nations General Assembly, "3237 (XXIX). Observer Status for the Palestine Liberation Organization," 1974, accessed January 9, 2017, https://goo.gl/cLQo4Z.

reinforced by resolution 338 that put an end to the 1973 Arab-Israeli confrontation.[33]

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 re-join 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. Beside formally asserting reconciliation within the PLO, this PNC session also signalled the PFLP's *de facto* acceptance of the PLO interim program, as the final resolutions restated PLO adherence to the programme approved in the previous PNC sessions.[34] 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 united 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 rightist 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 affair 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 reuniting 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

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[33] "PFLP Statement of Withdrawal from PLO Executive Committee", *PFLP Bulletin,* no. 13, September-October 1974, 2-4.
[34] "Al-Dawra al-Khamisa ʿAshara," *Wafa Info*, 1981, accessed February 8, 2017 http://info.wafa.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3983.

the LNM, to protect its base in Lebanon as well as to exploit the conflict to 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.[35] A further threat to the PLO status in Lebanon came from Israeli involvement in Lebanon increasingly aimed, since the beginning of the civil war, at weakening and ultimately destroying 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.

On the political level, 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.[36] 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 towards 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.[37]

With recovered unity, the PLO finally faced in 1982 the greatest threat to its survival until then. On June 6, the Israeli army launched operation 'Peace in Galilee' and started its second invasion of Lebanon. After reaching Beirut in nine

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[35] Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation*, 58–70.
[36] "Letter by PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to United Nations Secretary-General Kurth Waldheim on the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty, March 24, 1979" *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 4 (1979): 161-162; Hani al-Hassan, "PLO on Camp David: "The Plan is to Liquidate the Palestinians Politically", *MERIP Reports* 72 (1978) 12-13.
[37] *Political Report of the PFLP's 4th Congress* (Damascus: PFLP Central Information Committee, 1986), 55–80.

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.[38] 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 to achieve statehood.[39]

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

The phase started in the very aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which lasted until December 1987 when the First Intifada erupted in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), 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. Beside 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.[40]

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[41]. 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 basis of its action in the next phase.

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[38] Rex Brynen, "Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon," *Boulder: Westview Press*, 1990, accessed on February 8, 2017, http://prrn.mcgill.ca/research/papers/brynen2.htm.
[39] Sheila Ryan, "Israel's Invasion of Lebanon: Background to the Crisis" 11, no. 4 (1982): 27–31.
[40] Brynen, "Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon", accessed on May 11, 2017.
[41] Georges Corm, *Le Proche-Orient Éclaté: 1956-2010* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 517–533.

For the PLO leadership, the loss of a prominent place in the Lebanese arena jeopardised the diplomatic effort and reduced its bargaining power in the context of possible negotiations. From this stemmed the need to establish tighter relations with Jordan and Egypt and to coordinate over diplomatic strategy in order to counterbalance the aforementioned loss of bargaining weight.[42] Moreover, PLO Chairman Arafat was encouraged to find a common strategy with King Hussein of Jordan in the provisions spelled in the Reagan plan for peace. 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.[43] The American positions drove Arafat to start low profile contacts with Hussein, although this at first was not confirmed officially.

The PFLP had a completely opposite point of view. In the post-Beirut phase the Palestinian revolution had to face a defensive political battle against the projects for a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict on its different fronts, a battle focused on five main points: first, the Reagan plan, which denied to the PLO any representative role and King Hussein's attempt to co-opt the PLO and benefit from an equal representative status in line with it. Second, the so-called 'Arab peace plan' adopted in Fez in September 1982 which entailed the PLO recognition of Israel. Third, the US and Israeli plans to 'detach' the Lebanese question from that of Palestine and to transform Lebanon in the second step of the Camp David strategy. Fourth, the possible return of Egypt to the 'camp of official Arab solidarity' after its exclusion in the wake of the peace treaty with Israel. Finally, the attempt by elements external to the PLO and based in the OPT to form an alternative representative platform and collaborate with

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[42] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 551–555.
[43] Yehuda Lucaks, "President Ronald Reagan Peace Plan. 1 September 1982," in *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. A Documentary Record 1967-1992* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 72–78.

Israel, a phenomenon seen already in 1980 with the Israeli-imposed 'Villages League'[44] in the West Bank and Gaza.[45]

Moreover, these regional and international developments created a climate that fostered a spread of new political attitudes that 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 what it considered its 'natural nationalist path', the one that the history of the Palestinian revolution itself as well as the Palestinian National Charter had tracked.[46] The Popular Front throughout its history had rejected political solutions to the Palestinian question, mainly for ideological and strategic reasons. Its view of the struggle for liberation at the same time as a nationalist effort and as a revolutionary process towards the emancipation of the Palestinian and Arab masses, it was at odds not only with the idea of negotiating with the Israeli counterpart. In fact, 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'.[47] Thus, by virtue of its revolutionary 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 time of the 1974 Geneva conference[48], the virtual elimination of its military potential compromised the credibility of its rejectionist stand.

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[44] The 'Villages League' was composed by Israeli-appointed mayors of West Bank villages aimed at creating a political and administrative organisation alternative to the network of mayors loyal to the PLO. *See* Gresh, *The PLO. The Struggle Within*, 216–223.

[45] Bayan Sahifi Sadir ʿan al-Dawra al-Rabiʿa li-l-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Press Release Issued from the Fourth Session of PFLP's Central Committee)," *Al-Hadaf,* no. 659 February 7*,* 1983, 6–8;

[46] *Al-Taqrir al-Siyasi al-Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya fi Dawratiha al-Rabiʿa Hawla Harb Lubnan (The Political Report Issued by the Fourth General Assembly of PFLP's Central Committee on the War of Lebanon 1983)* (Damascus: PFLP Information Department, 1983), 90–91.

[47]Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin, *Al-Istratijiyya Al-Siyasiyya Wa Al-Tanzimiyya (Political and Organisational Strategy)*, 10–12.

[48] Muhammad Muslih, "Moderates and Rejectionists within the Palestine Liberation Organization," *Middle East Journal* 30, no. 2 (1976): 134–140.

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 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 which enjoyed a more restricted, though strong, mass support and was therefore more tightly linked to the traditional setting of the PLO after the takeover by the commando organisations, where military capabilities and effectiveness determined legitimacy and political weight.[49]

In the light of these considerations, 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'.[50] 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 Popular Front, which ensured 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

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[49] Gresh, *The PLO. The Struggle Within,* pp. 33–34.
[50] George Habash, "Kalima al-Rafiq George Habash fi-l-Mahrajan al-Markazi al-Ladhi Uqima fi Dimashq bi-Tarikh 10-12-1982 (Speech by Comrade George Habash during the Central Festival Held in Damascus on 10-12-1982)," in *George Habash Hawla Nataʾij Harb Lubnan (George Habash on the Consequences of the Lebanon War)* (Damascus: PFLP Information Department, 1983).

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 Quba, 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.[51]

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 the 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.[52]

To bolster its perspective on Palestinian unity, in early 1983 the PFLP underlined the declarations issued by the leaders of other Palestinian factions and by prominent 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 Khaled al-Fahhum, PNC Speaker, but also reported those speeches and declarations in which Arafat espoused a more 'revolutionary' rhetoric, downplaying or neglecting those occasions when Arafat 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 to refer to them as 'Palestinian reaction' or 'Palestinian right'.[53]

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[51] Jamil Hillal, Taysir Quba and Mark Garfield, "Palestinians in Damascus : The Democratic Front and the PFLP Mark Garfield , Jamil Hillal and Taysir Quba," *MERIP Reports*, no. 134 (1985): 15–16.
[52] "Qirarat Al-Majlis Al-Watani Al-Filastini: Al-Dawra Al-Rabiʿa ʿashara (Palestine National Council Resolutions: The Fourteenth Session)," accessed June 2, 2014, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3791.
"Final Resolutions Adopted by the Palestine National Council at Its Sixteenth Session, Algiers, February 14-22, 1983," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 3 (1983): 250–254.
[53] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 655, January 10, 1983, 4–5.

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 Popular Front affirmed the necessity of endorsing the 'tactical' call for the creation of an independent Palestinian state.[54] 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.[55]

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. From this stemmed the goal of gathering support from other factions around its own idea of Palestinian legitimacy. 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 jeopardised the PFLP's strategy.

The PFLP within the PLO Internal Conflict: Rejection and Coalition Politics.

The post-Beirut phase was characterized by Yasser Arafat's efforts to harvest, at the international level, the fruits of his fifteen-year-long career as PLO Chairman and translate them into diplomatic gains. The PFLP initially hoped to contain the PLO leadership's agenda through the traditional consensus-seeking approach, according to which the PLO Chairman's need for wide national approval would entail concessions to his diplomatic line. Nonetheless, as Arafat's resolve to

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[54] *Al-Taqrir al-Siyasi al-Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya fi Dawratiha al-Rabiʿa Hawla Harb Lubnan (The Political Report Issued by the Fourth General Assembly of PFLP's Central Committee on the War of Lebanon 1983)*, 119.

[55] Gresh, *The PLO. The Struggle Within,* 34–52.

progress his rapprochement with Jordan, Egypt and the US created tensions within Fatah itself and the whole PLO, the PFLP sought to gather consensus around its rejectionist line, initiating a phase of coalition politics. In the pursuit of such goal, the PFLP displayed a major weak point, namely its inability to manage conflicting political thrusts such as its adherence to rejectionism, its willingness to remain integrated within PLO decision-making or its diverse partners' agenda, both Palestinian and regional.

As a result, this lack of a cohesive and organised response allowed Arafat to strengthen his position within the PLO despite the division that his line provoked within the national movement, revealing the weaknesses of his opponents.

The 16th Palestine National Council: Constraining the Moderate Leadership.

In early 1983, the PFLP aimed at constraining Arafat's initiative which it saw as going too far in terms of diplomatic concessions to the various actors involved in the conflict. To this purpose, the Front acted according to the traditional pattern of PLO politics, namely it tried to mobilise the PLO opposition to pressurise and ultimately check the PLO Chairman. In pursuing such a goal, the PFLP also demonstrated its interest in preserving PLO unity and its readiness to agree to some concessions to ensure it.

The Popular Front feared that in the confusion of the post-Beirut phase, the PLO leadership line, which 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.[56] At the same time, the Popular Front was aware of the several and opposing sources of pressure exerted on the PLO by Arab

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[56] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 656, January 17,1983, 20–21.

countries. Despite countries such as Syria and Libya expressed positions closer to the PFLP's understanding of the new phase, the Popular Front was concerned that these pressures should not undermine the unity of the national movement in such delicate circumstances.[57] 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 as well as the collective nature of the PLO decision-making process.[58]

The need to find a consensus within the Palestinian fold, but also to exclude an excessively moderate line, prompted the PFLP's participation in several intra-factional meetings held during this period and 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'.[59] 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 Popular Front, 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

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[57] Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, "Flexible Militancy: A Report on the Sixteenth Session of the Palestine National Council, Algiers, February 14-22, 1983," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 4 (1983): 26–31.

[58] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 657, January 24,1983, 26–28.

[59] "Text of the Agreement Reached by Palestinian Resistance Groups Meeting in Aden, December 4-6, 1982," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 12, no.3 (1983), 243–245.

Syrian-aligned PF-GC, Saʿiqa and the Popular Struggle Front (PSF), 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.[60] 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.[61]

With these premises, the Palestinian organisations decided to convene the PNC in Algiers between February 14 and 22, 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.[62]

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'.[63] 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.

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[60] "Bayan Tarabulus (Tripoli Statement)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 657, January 24, 1983, 11-12.
[61] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : the Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 553–556.
[62] Gresh, *The PLO. The Struggle Within,* 1988, p. 233.
[63] "Final Resolutions Adopted by the Palestine National Council at Its Sixteenth Session, Algiers, February 14-22, 1983," *Journal of Palestine Studies,* 12 (1983) 250–254.

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'.[64] 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,[65] as Habash himself had declared during his PNC speech, and Arafat was granted enough freedom to pursue his diplomatic line.[66]

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 the concept of political settlement confirmed the validity of this assumption. More specifically, Habash's faction believed in the viability of the formation of a growing pole countering the diplomatic turn. Indeed, this was the goal that the PFLP pursued over the coming years, encouraged by the criticisms and divisions which emerged within Fatah due to the PLO Chairman's political orientations.

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 the PLO institutions. The PFLP aimed at emerging through factional association as the responsible actor, capable of attracting support also from some sectors within Fatah which did not view Arafat's diplomatic orientation with favour. 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 was to demonstrate the limits of coalitions politics within the national movement.

[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 661, February 21, 1983, 6–9.
[66] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 557–558.

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 impede 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.[67]

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.[68] 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

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[67] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 662, February 28, 1983, 4–5.
[68] *See* Emile F. Sahliyeh, *The PLO after the Lebanon War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 121–136; 184–189.

the PFLP was now unable to erect alone a sufficient obstacle to Arafat's policies.[69]

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.[70] 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 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.[71] 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 Saʿid Maragha (Abu Musa) contested Arafat's diplomatic strategy and affirmed that he did not represent the 'common denominator' of the Palestinian national movement anymore. His *de facto* abandonment of armed struggle and his continued contacts with the US 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.[72] The Popular Front 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.[73]

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

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[69] Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle Without: The Transformation of PLO Politics Since 1982," *International Affairs*, 65, no. 2 (1989), 254.
[70] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 670, April 25, 1983, 12–13.
[71] "PFLP-DFLP Joint Statement on the Formation of a Joint Political and Military Command," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 13, no. 1 (1983), 226–227.
[72] Eric Rouleau, Jim Paul, and Joe Stork, "The Mutiny against Arafat," *MERIP Reports*, no. 119 (1983): 13–14.
[73] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 680, July 4, 1983, 6–7.

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 determined the on-going dialogue with Jordan and behind it the US. This trend represented a clear violation of all the subsequent PNC resolutions and was the main factor which led to the military uprising within Fatah itself. Despite condemning the recourse to violence by Abu Musa and his followers, for the Joint Command the full responsibility lay on the PLO leadership which failed to stand effectively against pressure coming from the 'Arab reaction' which aimed at dragging the PLO into the American peace camp.[74] 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.[75]

In issuing such a program the two Fronts thought they would be able to win a good deal of 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.[76] In this framework, the Joint Command proposed and adopted a defensive attitude prioritising the protection of older political programs and positions such as those stated by the interim program issued during the 14th PNC session held in Damascus in 1979.[77]

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[74] "Barnamaj al-Wahda wa al-Islah al-Dimuqrati fi Munazzama al-Tahrir al-Filastiniyya (Program of Unity and Democratic Reform in the Palestine Liberation Organization)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 695, October 24, 1983, 6–9.

[75] *Ibid.,* 7-9

[76] *Cf.* Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 558–560.

[77] "Barnamaj al-Wahda wa al-Islah al-Dimuqati fi Munazzama al-Tahrir al-Filastiniyya (Program of Unity and Democratic Reform in the Palestine Liberation Organization)" 7; "Al-Dawra al-Rabiʿa Ashara (The Fourteenth Session)", Wafa Info, accessed September 16, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3791.

In calling for a program 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. As the military assault escalated, the rebels alienated increasingly the already marginal support they enjoyed, while Syria's hegemonic designs on the PLO became more and more intolerable for its Palestinian allies, particularly the PFLP. 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.[78]

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 Mubarak, opening the door to the end of Egypt's boycott by the PLO and the Arab countries imposed after the peace treaty with Israel.[79] 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.

Indeed, the PFLP immediately escalated its verbal attacks against the PLO chairman and called for the first time for his resignation, since the meeting with

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[78] Eric Rouleau, "The Future of the PLO," *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 1 (1983): 154.
[79] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 567–573.

Hosni Mubarak represented a 'clear deviation from what was established by several PNC sessions', included the 16th. George 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 former 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.[80]

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 Popular Front directed its attacks toward 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.[81] 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'.[82] In this context, the PFLP and the DFLP issued a joint statement along with the PCP and the smaller Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) in what can be considered the first move 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 voice 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 made a vote for his removal more unlikely. Hence, the PFLP and other opposition factions pressured Fatah's Central Committee to 'develop

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[80] "Al-Rafiq George Habash fi Muʾtamar Sahafi (Comrade George Habash in a Press Conference)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 705, January 2, 1984, 18–22.
[81] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 704, December 26, 1983, 8.
[82] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 706, January 9, 1984, 7–9.

its position vis-à-vis Arafat' in order to ease the convocation of the PCC, where Arafat would be 'judged democratically'.[83]

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. Indeed, this latter 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, Pressure from Without: The PFLP's Fluctuation in the Intra-Palestinian Dialogue.

The intra-Palestinian dialogue that followed the conclusion of Fatah's internal confrontation, allowed the tensions affecting the PFLP to emerge. 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 clashing forces that ultimately undermined its position.

Despite some public criticisms and condemnations of Arafat's talks with Mubarak, to which the PFLP gave excessive prominence,[84] not only was the rest of Fatah unwilling to dismiss Arafat from his post, but several top leaders actually backed rapprochement with Egypt, and Fatah's Central Committee avoided taking a harsh position towards him stating once and for all that his leadership was not questionable.[85] 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 weight to restrain Fatah's leader. Nevertheless, the PFLP, in the

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[83] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 705, January 2, 26–27.
[84] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 706, January 9, 22–26.
[85] Sahliyeh, *The PLO after the Lebanon War,* 182–183.

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 vis-à-vis 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.[86] However, a month later during a meeting in Algiers, the same DA showed its readiness 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. Actually, 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.[87]

The Popular Front for its part viewed 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 to Fatah, entailing the abandonment of Arafat-Hussein coordination.[88] 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 fostering the PFLP's reluctance to accept the convocation of the PNC as the Assad regime was still willing to put an end to

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[86] PFLP et al., "Statement Issued by the Joint Command of the Democratic and Popular Fronts, the Palestine Liberation Front and the Palestine Communist Party, Calling for a Collective Leadership," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 4 (1984): 206–207.
[87] "Statement Issued by a Joint Palestinian Meeting Agreeing to Initiate a Comprehensive Dialogue Leading to the Consolidation of PLO, Unity, Algiers, April 22, 1984.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 4 (1984): 208–209.
[88] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 721, May 7, 1984, 4–5.

Arafat's dominance of the PLO.[89] Furthermore, Syria's positions in this instance were consistent with the PFLP's goal of shifting the internal Palestinian balance. Unlike the DFLP, the Popular Front reiterated its determination to obtain 'Arafat's fall' as well as continuing to demand the participation of Syrian-proxy factions in the PNC,[90] notwithstanding their recourse to violence and their readiness to establish an alternative PLO, a principle that the PFLP always rejected. This attachment to 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'.[91] Thus, even when the DA and the Fatah Central Committee finally reached an agreement in Aden, in June 1984, 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

[89] Sahliyeh, *The PLO after the Lebanon War,* p. 194.
[90] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 722, May 14, 1984, 4–5.
[91] Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin, *Al-Istratijiyya al-Siyasiyya wa al-Tanzimiyya (Political and Organisational Strategy)*, 17–25. PFLP Information Department, *Task of the New Stage. The Political Report of the Third National Congress of PFLP* (Beirut, 1972), 34–41.

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.[92]

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).[93] 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.[94] 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.[95] All of these 'Arafat violations' were indicated by the PFLP as reasons for the failed implementation of the Aden-Algiers agreement; consequently the Front 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.[96]

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.[97] Through this request, on the one hand the Popular Front demonstrated its sensibility to Syria's priorities, benefitting in this also from Algeria's position, which did not accept hosting the PNC if all Palestinian factions did not reach a global understanding. On the other, the PFLP conceived the confrontation with Arafat through the lens of the traditional PLO consensus

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[92] "Muhaddir Liqaʾ ʿAden (Report of the Aden Meeting)", *Al-Hadaf* no. 730, July 17, 1984, 8–10.
[93] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 730, July 17, 1984, 7–8.
[94] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 732, July 31, 1984, 7–10.
[95] "Palestine Chronology, May 16 to August 31, 1984," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 1 (October 01, 1984): 231.
[96] "Mudhkira al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiya ila al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-Harakat Fath (Reminder from the PFLP to Fatah Central Committee)", *Al-Hadaf*, no. 738, 1984, 4–6.
[97] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 740, 1984, 6–18.

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 the 12ᵗʰ 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.[98]

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 Popular Front 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 consensus 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

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[98] Sahliyeh, *The PLO after the Lebanon War,* 1986, pp. 197–198.

irreversible failure of a political process begun right after the evacuation from Beirut.

At the same time, the PFLP confronted an unprecedented impasse in terms of political initiative. The initial diplomatic successes of the PLO Chairman underlined the PFLP's lack of an adequate alternative. While Arafat, as it will be shown, 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, the PFLP was only capable of replying by forming 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, both positive and negative for the Popular Front, underscoring the political impasse it was experiencing. As evidence, despite the PFLP's continuous denunciations, a bigger role in the failure of Arafat's strategy was played by regional and international pressure: 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 analysis of the PFLP's conduct during these years of continued tensions within the PLO underscores 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. In fact, the PFLP appeared ready to open dialogue with Fatah and to 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 that already emerged before the Amman PNC. In sum, the PFLP's agency between 1984 and early 1987 put in evidence the policy fluctuation pattern, as the Front 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 Popular Front rejected the accusations of the 'Palestinian rightists' and to a certain extent, also of some representatives of the 'democratic forces' who blamed the PFLP for its intransigence and its continual request to delay the PNC. Rather, the Front underlined how, coming after Reagan's re-election and Jordanian-Egyptian rapprochement, this step represented the PLO 'deviationist leadership's' official endorsement of the political settlement plans based on the Camp David blueprint, the Reagan plan and the 'delegation' of Palestinian representation to Jordan, namely a global 'liquidatory' policy, likely to be revived under the re-elected Reagan administration.[99] 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 Popular Front, Arafat's step had as a consequence the *de facto* end of the leftist coalition. Indeed, Hawatmeh's organisation declared on November 20 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.[100]

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.[101] 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 UNSC 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

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[99] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 747, November 19, 1984, 4–5.
[100] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 748, November 26, 1984, 4–6.
[101] Naseer Aruri, "The PLO and the Jordan Option," *Third World Quaterly* 7, no. 4 (1985): 894.

explicit the PLO shift towards the Mubarak regime and its alignment with the so-called 'Cairo-Amman axis'.[102]

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.[103] Nevertheless, the PLO Chairman's position within the PLO and more broadly the Palestinian national movement was bolstered after the PNC as he proved capable of not only imposing his line on the rest of the PLO, but also of doing so without concession 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 the Arab and international media that the PFLP now 'struggled for the organisation of a unifying national council'.[104] 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 Popular Front 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 February 11, 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

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[102] "Al-Dawra al-Sabiʿa ʿAshara, ʿAmman 22-29 Tishrin al-Thani 1984 (The 17th Session, Amman 22-29 November)", *Wafa Info,* accessed January 10, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3249

[103] Aruri, "The PLO and the Jordan Option," 896–899.

[104] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 749, December 3, 1984, 6–8; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 751 December 12*,* 1984, 18–20.

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'.[105]

The PFLP grasped the 'qualitative' nature of Arafat's step and the perils it implied.[106] The agreement and the alleged dismissal of the most important principles stated in the Palestine 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. Actually, the PFLP's analysis correctly viewed the agreement as an unprecedented concession to the US 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 US and Israel alike also rejected the idea of an international conference entailing the participation of the USSR.[107] Furthermore, although after the signing of the agreement the PLO Executive Committee issued a communique to reaffirm its rejection of UNSC resolution 242[108], both Egypt and Jordan reaffirmed their reliance upon UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, underlining that for the PLO's Arab partners, this was not an amendable point.[109] 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.[110] Conversely, the Popular Front 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, national 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

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[105] "Text of the Jordanian-Palestinian Accord Released February 23, 1985," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 3 (1985): 206.

[106] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 758, February 18, 1985, 4.

[107] Ann M. Lesch, "U.S. Policy Toward the Palestinians in the 1980s," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 12, no.1/2 (1990): 175.

[108] "Communique of the Executive Committee of the PLO, Feburary 19, 1985, on the Plan of Joint Palestinian-Jordanian Action.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 3 (1985), 205.

[109] "Hussein-Mubarak Joint Press Conference Following March 6, 1985 Summit Meeting, Hurghada, Egypt," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 3 (1985): 207.

[110] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 767, April 22, 1985, 4–5.

and the NA, would decrease in the light of Arafat's step, allowing the possibility of forming a new coalition to emerge.[111] 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.[112] 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, beside 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 national anti-imperialist line'.[113] 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 Popular Front adopted since the evacuation from Beirut and with its attempts to build oppositional coalitions. This represented a

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[111] "Habash fi Mu'tamar Sahafi fi 'Aqab Ittifaq 'Amman (Habash in a Press Conference in the Aftermath of the Amman Agreement)", *Al-Hadaf,* no.758, February 18, 1985, 6–11.

[112] Jamil Hillal, Taysir Quba Mark Garfield, "Palestinians in Damascus : The Democratic Front and the PFLP". *MERIP Reports*, 1985, 16.

[113] "I'lan al-Barnamaj al-Siyasi wa al-Mabadi' al-Tanzimiyya al-Asasiyya li-Jabha al-Inqadh al-Watani al-Filastini (Announcement of the Political Programm and Foundative Organizational Principles of the Palestine National Salvation Front)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 764 April 1, 1985, 8–11.

major difference with PNSF members such as Saʿiqa 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. Actually, this difficulty stemmed from several factors which influenced Arafat's political course during 1985 and 1986.

First, as the PFLP expected, the US presented additional demands to the PLO. Initially the Americans agreed on PLO acceptance of resolution 242 after the first meeting between the US 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.[114]

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,'[115] 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 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.[116]

A third element further complicating the position of the PLO leadership, especially on the international level, was the series of operations carried out by

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[114] Lesch, 1990, 176.

[115] The involvement of the PFLP and the PNSF in the War of the Camps and the impact of the conflict on them will be treated in more detail in the next chapter in the framework of a section dedicated to PFLP-Syrian relations.

[116] Joe Stork, "The War of the Camps , The War of the Hostages," *MERIP Reports*, no. 133 (1985), 5.

several smaller Palestinian groups against civilian targets. First, a Palestinian commando killed three Israelis on a yacht in Cyprus on September 25 claiming that they were Mossad agents. This action prompted an Israeli air raid against PLO headquarters in Tunis which killed 73 people. Some days later, a group of militants of the Palestine 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.[117]

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.[118] 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.[119] 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'[120] 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.[121] Furthermore, concerning the War of the Camps, one should take into account the fact that this conflict negatively affected the PFLP too. Indeed, Habash's organisation was put in a difficult situation when the country 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

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[117] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 586.
[118] *Ibid.*
[119] Robert G. Neumann and Ghassan Bishara, "Robert G . Neumann : A Failure to Negotiate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 3 (1986): 5; 9.
[120] Mark A. Bruzonsky, "The Second Defeat of Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 3 (1986): 45–48.
[121] *Cf.* Lesch, 1990 p. 176; Jacob C. Hurewitz, Hasan Rahman and Yoram Dinstein, "Middle East Peace Process," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting (American Society of International Law)*, 90 (1996), 26.

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. This evidenced that the PFLP, in the pursuit of its opposition policies, was not prone to disengage totally from the PLO mainstream. In fact, the efforts that the Popular Front spent to unify the PLO after 1985 demonstrated 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 Popular Front'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 US 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.[122]. 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

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[122] "Cairo Declaration on the PLO and Terrorism as Read by PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat, Cairo, 7 November 1985.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 2 (1986): 214–216.

King was highlighting the PLO's unwillingness to shift position on the UN resolutions.[123]

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 Popular Front saw the crisis of PLO-Jordan relations as confirmation of its analysis. For instance, the Cairo declaration proved that the PLO leadership was 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 resolution 242 and 338, as demanded by Jordan on US behalf.[124]

Retaining such a sceptical attitude towards Fatah, the Popular Front reacted cautiously to Hussein's abrogation of his coordination with Arafat. First, the King's speech did not entail a parallel relinquishment by Fatah of 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.[125] Furthermore, the Popular Front interpreted Hussein's announcement as a step aiming at taking the initiative and impose 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.[126]

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

[123] "King Hussein's Address on Middle East Peace, Amman, 19 February 1986.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 4 (1986): 206–232.

[124] *Al-Hadaf*, no 794, November 11, 1985, 4–5.

[125] "PLO Executive Committee Statement, Tunis, 7 March 1986.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 4 (1986): 232–242.

[126] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 806, February 24, 4–5.

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.[127] 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.[128] 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.[129]

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.[130] The PFLP joined the debate from its viewpoint of alternative opposition and the logic it adopted was the same as that marking 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 program as 'issued by the

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[127] Jan Abu Shakrah, "The 'Iron Fist', October 1985 to January 1986," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 4 (July 01, 1986): 120–123.

[128] Kevin Kelly, "Jordan ' s Plan for the West Bank," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 144 1987, 44.

[129] Miriam Jordan, *Anglo-American Support For Jordan. The Career of King Hussein* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 139–140.

[130] "The Breakdown of Palestinian-Jordanian Coordination. Interview with Salah Khalaf," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 4 (1986): 171.

legitimate PNC sessions' and the implementation of a collective democratic leadership capable of avoiding the 'individualism which plagued' the PLO during the mid-1980s.[131] Echoing the slogans launched throughout the previous years, the Popular Front 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'.[132]

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.[133] 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.[134] In rejecting these criticisms, the Popular Front 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

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[131] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 813, April 14, 1986, 6–8.
[132] "Bayyan Sadir ʿan al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin bi-Munasaba Yawm al-ʿUmmal al-ʿalami (Communique issued by the PFLP on the occasion of International Workers' Day)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 816, May 5, 1986, 11.
[133] Ibid., 16.
[134] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 820, June 9, 16.

the closure to further contacts with Egypt represented the only guarantees of PLO return on its 'nationalist, anti-imperialist, natural line'.[135]

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.[136] 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.[137] 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.[138]

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

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[135] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 824, July 14, 1986, 4–5.
[136] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 834, September 30, 1986, 12–14.
[137] "Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya wa al-Hizb al-Shuyuʿi al-Filastini: Bayan Mushtarak (PFLP-PCP Joint Statement)" *Al-Hadaf,* no. 840, November 10, 8–10; "Qiraʾa fi al-Bayyan al-Thulathi al-Sadir ʿan al-Quwwa al-Dimuqratiyya al-Filastiniyya (A Reading of the Tripartite Statement Issued by Palestinian Democratic Forces)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 838, January 19, 1987, 12–15.
[138] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 843, December 1, 1986, 13; *Cf.* Galia Golan, "Gorbachev's Middle East Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 66, no.1 (1987), 41.

countries hosting the talks, such as the discussions that George Habash held with Algerian President Shadli Ben Jadid and Libya's Mu'ammar Gaddafi[139].

As a result, a breakthrough in negotiations was eventually achieved with the issue of two 'political documents' signalling 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, letting the last obstacle to reconciliation finally fall. Indeed, the document also set a date for the start of the new PNC session, precisely on April 20, to be preceded by a ten-day-long comprehensive dialogue.[140] Afterwards, a week later, the PFLP and the DFLP re-joined the most radical factions such as the PF-GC and Fatah-Intifada, in a similar document issued in the Libyan capital Tripoli. The statement basically echoed the points announced by the previous statement. The two documents 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.[141]

Finally, after the PLO Executive Committee abrogated formally the Amman agreement on 19 April,[142] 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 UNSC resolutions 242 and 338, and excluded the idea of confederation with Jordan; it also referred to the 16th session concerning

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[139] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 857, March 23, 1987, 10.
[140] "The Tunis Document, Tunis, Tunisia, 16 March 1987," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 4 (1987): 189–192.
[141] "Al-Wathiqa al-Siyasiyya wa al-Tanzimiyya al-Lati Tawassalat ilay-ha al-Fasaʾil al-Sitt fi Tarablus al-Gharb (The Political Document Achieved by the Six Faction in Tripoli, Lybia), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 858, March 30, 1987*,* 6–7.
[142] "Cancellation of the Amman Agreement, Algiers, 19 April 1987," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 4 (1987): 195–196.

relations with Egypt, namely affirming that contacts with Mubarak's regime should be proportionate to his relinquishing of the Camp David accords.[143]

In the wake of the closure of the PNC, 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 Popular Front 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 definitely failed to impose their policies on the PLO.[144]

The conclusion of the PLO split in early 1987 and the PFLP's agency through it reflected two features of its political course. 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 the weakening process 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 analysis of the PFLP's conduct between the end of 1982 and early 1987 allows some major features to emerge with clarity. First, the split with Fatah unfolded gradually and it is possible to identify the different steps of this break: Fatah's infighting and Arafat's visit to Cairo, the convocation of the 17th PNC in Jordan and finally the signing of the Amman agreement were all milestones in gradual but regular escalation. From this stemmed that the harshness of the

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[143] "Al-Dawra al-Thamina ʿAshara, al-Jazaʾir 20-25/04/1987 (The 18th Session, Algiers, 20-25/04/1987)", *Wafa Info*, accessed January 25, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3250; "Resolutions of the Political Committee of the Eighteenth Session of the PNC, Algiers, 26 April 1987.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 4 (1987): 196–201.

[144] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 863, May 4, 1987, 4–7.

PFLP's positions vis-à-vis the PLO Chairman increased, following the same pace. This was indicative of the fact that the PFLP's first choice was not to break totally with the 'rightist leadership,' and confirmed its fundamental adherence to the PLO as the main platform to pursue its own goals. At the same time, this gradual estrangement from Fatah indicated also the 'reactive' nature of the PFLP's political initiative during this period. In other words, had Arafat been willing to relinquish his diplomatic strategy at any point, the Popular Front would have appeared ready to dismiss its most intransigent calls and open a dialogue with the PLO leadership. Actually, this is what eventually happened: as soon as Arafat's agenda reached a fatal deadlock and he was forced to pull back from it, displaying consequently the possibility to achieve reconciliation, the PFLP stopped calling for his immediate fall as a precondition for PLO unity.

The PFLP's agency throughout the unfolding of the PLO split ultimately reflected its willingness to oppose Fatah while maintaining its integration within the PLO. This led the PFLP to attempt to establish an opposition coalition within the PLO to counterbalance Arafat's autocratic imposition of a majority principle on the national movement and his diplomatic strategy. However, the PFLP's pursuit of a 'loyal opposition' to the PLO leadership was at the base of serious policy fluctuation. In fact, its conception of opposition to Arafat clashed with different sources of pressure, both internal and external. First, the PFLP's rhetoric oscillated 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.

Secondly, the PFLP's political line fluctuated also within the context of the opposition coalitions in which it participated. This stemmed from the different positions that the other factions held concerning Fatah's agenda. Notwithstanding its overall loyal opposition to Fatah, the PFLP supported a more hard-line approach towards Arafat than its main leftist partners, the DFLP and the PCP. The DFLP consistently adopted softer positions towards Fatah since its inception, while the PCP was seeking PLO membership during the mid-1980s.

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

Beside 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. In fact, 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 backed a second military assault on Palestinian camps in Lebanon, as will be shown in the next chapter.

In the light of these considerations, the PFLP's policy line failed to influence the external and internal developments affecting the Palestinian national movement. Even though Arafat's agenda finally failed, the PFLP's role in that failure was fairly limited. This phase thus signalled a serious step in the PFLP's marginalisation process in which the opposition-integration dilemma and the policy fluctuation pattern manifested clearly. However, the overall processual character of the PFLP's marginalisation emerged with positive aspects stemming from its adherence to the PLO framework. 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. This provided an essential basis for playing a significant role in the next phase of the Palestinian national movement history, that of the First Intifada starting in 1987.

Chapter 2 - The Radical Alternative: The PFLP's Fluctuant Foreign Policy.

Introduction.

The PFLP's internal agenda was aimed at stopping Arafat's diplomatic strategy and significantly affected its priorities on the regional and international levels. The competitive and fragmented political environment characterising Palestinian politics in the post-Beirut phase was reflected in the PFLP's efforts to counterbalance the PLO leadership's leanings towards the conservative regimes and the United States. The general goal of this chapter is thus to outline how the PFLP's orientations in foreign relations simultaneously reflected and contributed to its marginalisation within the Palestinian national movement. To this end, the present chapter first approaches the direct impact that relations with the Syrian regime had on the PFLP's trajectory throughout this phase. Secondly, the PFLP's positioning towards the USSR and its attempts to establish closer contacts are investigated to determine the Soviet role in the Popular Front's opposition narrative and policies and the actual effect of this relationship.

The PFLP's oppositional priorities led to closer coordination with Syria not only as the result of the PFLP's relocation to Damascus, but also due to the ostensible shared interests with the Assad regime. Nevertheless, deep-rooted contradictions between the PFLP and Damascus continued to affect their partnership and resurfaced with growing strength over the period addressed. Therefore, the present chapter illustrates the conditions that determined the PFLP-Syrian rapprochement, the narrative employed to justify this alliance, and the actual goals that the PFLP shared with Damascus. Subsequently, the gradual re-emergence of major differences is pointed out in order to outline their impact on the PFLP's agency. What is stressed is the PFLP's growing difficulty in harmonising Syrian hegemonic conduct towards the PLO and its historical commitment to the defence of Palestinian political autonomy. These contradicting elements ultimately fostered the PFLP's policy fluctuation, undermining the viability of its 'nationalist' alternative to Arafat's 'deviationist' diplomatic strategy. As evidence, this chapter addresses the final PFLP's shift

from alignment with Damascus to military opposition to its proxies. This reflected the resurfacing of integration within the PLO and its protection from Arab aggression as a PFLP's paramount priority.

While coordination with Syria was a response to the PLO leadership's contacts with Jordan, the PFLP tried to match Arafat's orientations towards the US, calling for improved relations with the USSR. However, long-standing divergences marked PFLP-Soviet relations too, and in the post-Beirut phase, their goals and interests coincided only on circumscribed issues. Therefore, what is stressed is the tactical character of PFLP-USSR relations that, despite the PFLP's rhetoric, did not achieve a strategic dimension. Although the USSR's conduct did not directly impact the PFLP's policy fluctuation, it nonetheless helped to jeopardise its agenda during the period under scrutiny. The clear contradictions between Palestinian, but also specifically PFLP, interests and Soviet goals undermined the credibility of a partnership with Moscow and bolstered the Palestinian trend calling for direct contacts with Washington. Ultimately, this chapter shows how pressures deriving from the PFLP's relations with external partners, coupled with internal tensions, emphasising the opposition-integration dilemma and the ensuing negative patterns.

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

Coordination with Syria was a quite new element in the PFLP's foreign policy. Therefore, before addressing the actual implications of the PFLP-Syrian relationship, an outline of the conditions that favoured such rapprochement is needed, to subsequently assess the impact of Syrian policies on the PFLP.

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 Popular Front was forged upon their opposition, on the one hand, to Arafat's diplomatic strategy and his dialogue with Jordan and Egypt, and on the other, to 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 entailed the PFLP's marginalisation within the PLO, as highlighted in the previous chapter. 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 embodied 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]

However, from its foundation and during the first half of the 1970s, the Popular Front was very critical towards the so-called 'nationalist military regimes' such as Syria or Egypt. If on the one hand these states were 'tactical allies' in the battle against Israel and imperialism, on the other, 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

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[1] William B. Quandt, *Peace Process. American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington D.C. - Los Angeles: Brookings Institution, University of California Press, 2005), 1–7.
[2] Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond a Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran. Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 74.
[3] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 655, January 10, 1983, 93-96.
[4] PFLP Information Department, *Task of the New Stage. The Political Report of the Third National Congress of PFLP* (Beirut, 1972). 27-28; 70-78.

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, the Popular Front 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 Popular Front 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 Fuʾad, head of the Military Department, supported more coordination with Syria and the end of relations with Saddam Hussein's

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[5] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians," *Arab Studies Quaterly* 8, no. 1 (1986): 8–12.

Iraq. According to AbuKhalil's account, during this Congress session, Abu Ali Mustafa's group gained prominence within the PFLP, partly because of George Habash's inability to halt their moves despite his views differing 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 split within the Popular Front 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-Zaʿtar massacre[8] as well as because of its poor performance in confronting the Israeli army's quick advance

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[6] Asʿad AbuKhalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 367–369.

[7] Interviews with PFLP official for Lebanon Marwan ʿAbd Al-ʿAl and former PFLP's Politburo Member Salah Salah, Beirut, May 28, 2015.

[8] During summer 1976, Phalangist forces laid siege to the densely-populated Palestinian refugee camp of Tell al-Zaʿtar, located in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, which hosted a significant number of Palestinian forces. When Phalangist forces entered the camp more than a thousand Palestinians, both fighters and civilians, were massacred. The Syrian government had dispatched its army to Lebanon shortly before the siege to stop the advance of the joint Lebanese progressive-Palestinian forces against the coalition of Christian conservative militias. Although not taking part directly to the massacre the Syrian forces contributed to tightening the siege on Tell al-Zaʿtar camp.

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 positions became 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 aggression toward 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 shared opposition to Lebanese-Israeli peace to bolster its agenda of counterbalancing Arafat's contacts with Jordan and Egypt. In the PFLP's narrative, common 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

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[9] *See* Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung. Volume 1* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967).

[10] *Al-Taqrir al-Siyasi al-Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya fi Dawratiha al-Rabiʿa Hawla Harb Lubnan (The Political Report Issued by the Fourth General Assembly of PFLP's Central Committee on the War of Lebanon 1983)* (Damascus: PFLP Information Department, 1983), 118.

[11] Nasri ʿAbd Al-Rahman and ʿEmad Al-Rihaima, "Al-Rafiq George Habash fi Hadith Shamil Maʿ Al-Hadaf (Comrade George Habash in a Comprehensive Interview with Al-Hadaf)," *Al-Hadaf*, no. 660, February 14, 1983, 19-30.

two countries.[12] Although the text of the agreement did not contain any reference to Syria and the PLO, the Israelis immediately specified that the withdrawal of their army was conditional on a preliminary withdrawal of Syrian and Palestinian forces.[13] In turn, the Syrians, while rejecting the agreement, posed the same precondition before pulling out of the neighbouring country, asking for an Israeli withdrawal first; 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] The 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] In fact, 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

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[12] "Text of the Lebanese-Israeli Troop Withdrawal Agreement," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 4 (1983): 91–101.
[13] "Speech of Israeli Foreign Minister Director General Kimche at Agreement Signing, Kiriyat Shimona, May 17, 1983," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 4 (1983): 232.
[14] "Bayan Sahafi Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Press Communique Issued from the PFLP's Central Committee Politburo)" *Al-Hadaf,* no. 674, May 23, 1983, 21.
[15] Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 223.
[16] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 675, May 30, 1983, 1983, 6–7.

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 Popular Front 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 Beqaʿa, 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 on the side of 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]

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[17] Abu Ali Mustafa, " Awsaʿ Iʾtilaf Watani li-Muhasara Nahj ʿArafat (A Wider National Coalition to Siege Arafat's Tactic)"," *Al-Hadaf*, no. 710, February 13, 1984, 26–27.

[18] "Al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya wa al-Jabha al-Dimuqratiyya fi Bayan Mushtarak (The PFLP and the DFLP in a Joint Statement)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 676, June 6,1983, 8–9.

[19] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin bi-Munasaba Inʿiqad Dawratiha al-Khamisa (Communique Issued by PFLP's Central Committee on Occasion of Its Fifth Session)", *Al-Hadaf*, no. 679, June 27, 1983*,* 18.

[20] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 685, August 15, 1983, 4–5.

[21] Naseer Aruri, "The United States' Intervention In Lebanon," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (October 01, 1985): 64–65.

[22] "Bayan Sadir ʿan Ijtimaʿ al-Qiyada al-Mushtaraka li-l-Jabhatayn al-Shaʿbiyya wa al-Dimuqrayiyya (Communique Issued from a Meeting of PFLP and DFLP Joint Command)" *Al-Hadaf,* no. 691 September 26, 1983, 18.

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. The pressure exerted by Syria, especially through its Lebanese and Palestinian allies, and the related setbacks to Phalangist and Lebanese Armed Forces against the PSP and Amal militias demonstrated that Gemayel was not able to put into practice a settlement for the Lebanese crisis without Syrian consent, thus emboldening the PFLP in 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 taking into due account the fact that, despite the setback of the 1982 Israeli invasion, Syria still had the power to thwart its implementation.[25]

The ultimate annulment of the Lebanese-Israeli peace treaty, as well as the development of civil conflict, provided, according to the PFLP, hard evidence of

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[23] "Intisar Lubnan al-Maʿani wa al-Durus. Al-Rafīq George Habash li-Zamila al-Nidaʾ (Lebanon Victory Meanings and Lessons. Comrade George Habash to the Fellow Magazine Al-Nida)" *Al-Hadaf,* no. 716, April 26 1984, 11–14.
[24] *Cf.* Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 222–225.
[25] William Quandt, "Reagan's Lebanon Policy: Trial and Error" *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 2 (1984): 250.

the effectiveness of coordinating with Syria. However, as the next sections will show, fulfilling shared goals in Lebanon also entailed the reappearance of underlying contradictions between the Popular Front 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 consistently to assert its control over the PLO in order to acquire more leverage in the context of the conflict 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' in the wider context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, 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 US 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 to the PLO with more confidence and act to counter Arafat's agenda more resolutely. For this reason, when some Fatah military officials located in Lebanon decided to rebel

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[26] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria. Revolution from above* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 150-152.

[27] Hinnebusch, "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians," 4.

against the PLO Chairman in summer 1983, Syria intervened on their side and provided massive military support.[28]

For its part, the PFLP supported calls by the Fatah rebels 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 US. 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 the Popular Front 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 which led to the revolt, 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

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[28] Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond a Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran. Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 74–75.

[29] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 551–561.

[30] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997, 554.

[31] Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinian Dilemma: PLO Policy After Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, no. 1 (1985): 99–100.

[32] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 694, October 17, 1983, 10–14.

[33] *Al-ʾIstratijiyya al-Siyasiyya wa al-Tanzimiyya (Political and Organisational Strategy)* (PFLP Information Department, 1967), 31–39.

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 Popular Front, 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 traditional 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

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[34] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 694, 10–14.

[35] Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle without: The Transformation of PLO Politics since 1982," *International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (1989): 248–249; 255–262.

[36] Rashid Khalidi, "Behind the Fateh Rebellion," *MERIP Reports*, no. 119 (1983): 11.

Egypt's Mubarak. The pact included the acceptance of some important demands raised by the opposition, however, the Popular Front 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 Popular Front 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 this; consequently, he remained closer to Arafat's understanding of the situation.[40]

The conclusion of Fatah infighting did not, however, 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 internal PLO 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 with Syria to opposing its Palestinian goals.

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[37] See chapter 1, 19-20.
[38] Khalidi, "Behind the Fateh Rebellion", 4–5.
[39] Yasser Arafat and Simon Malley, "Yasser Arafat Interviewed," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 1 (1984): 182.
[40] AbuKhalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," 369.

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 Syrian strategy to impose a settlement in Lebanon.[42] The main obstacle to this goal was the Palestinian armed presence in the 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, 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 phase 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

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[41] *Cf.* Rashid Khalidi, "Lebanon in the Context of Regional Politics: Palestinian and Syrian Involvement in the Lebanese Crisis," *Third World Quaterly* 7, no. 3 (1985): 1–4.
[42] Joe Stork, "The War of the Camps , The War of the Hostages," *MERIP Reports,* no. 133 (1985): 6.
[43] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 581–583.
[44] Stork, "The War of the Camps , The War of the Hostages," 6.

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 Popular Front 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 formulate an interpretation of events alternative to both Amal and Fatah. In doing so, the Popular Front aimed at disassociating Syria from Amal's hegemonic logic while emerging as a potential Palestinian partner capable of restabilising 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 Popular Front affirmed that the

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[45] The attack to the Palestinian camps came after some skirmishes between militiamen.

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]

Apart from the recurring reference to an Israeli conspiracy, ultimate explanation for all negative developments in the Lebanese civil war, the PFLP's reading was not very far from reality. However, in the first phases of the confrontation with Amal, the Popular Front avoided making any reference to Syria's role, despite the clear intervention of the Assad regime to back Amal and notably, despite Habash himself having left Damascus shortly after the beginning of the clashes, fearing retaliation by the Syrian 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

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[46] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 772, June 3, 1985, 4–6.
[47] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 583.
[48] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 772, 14–15.
[49] William Harris, "Syria in Lebanon," *MERIP Reports*, no. 134 (1985): 12.

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 Popular Front 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 Popular Front'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, something which entitled the coalition to represent the PLO more legitimately than Fatah, thus providing it with 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

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[50] Asʿad AbuKhalil, "Syria and the Shiites," *Third World Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1990): 9–13.

[51] "Habash fi Muqabala Maʿ Idhʿa Monte Carlo (Habash in an Interview with Radio Monte Carlo)", Al-Hadaf, no. 773, June 10, 1985, 6–7.

[52] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 773, June 10, 1985, 28.

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 signify 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's 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 fighting forces involved in the War of the Camps, belonging to Fatah and the DFLP, were not content with the formulation of the agreement. Jamil Hilal, the DFLP's spokesperson at the time, declared that the agreement could represent a danger as recognition of the PNSF could be exploited to deepen the divide within the Palestinian fold, as well as representing the 'annulment of previous agreement between the PLO and the Lebanese

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[53] *Cf.* Rex Brynen, "PLO Policy in Lebanon : Legacies and Lessons," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 18 (1980), 61–63; As'ad AbuKhalil, "Syria and the Shiites", 10.

[54] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Communique Issued by PFLP's Politburo)"; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 774, June 17, 1985, 6-8.

[55] "Nass Ittifaq Dimashq (Text of the Damascus Agreement)", Al-Hadaf, no. 775 July 1, 1985, 9.

government guaranteeing the right of self-administration and self-defence'.[56] 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, aggression 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 that the PFLP adopted between Amal and the PLO leadership brought little leverage on the situation and did not lend wider influence to the Popular Front as an effective mediator and responsible Palestinian force. As the following section will show, the PFLP's policy fluctuation played a relevant role in making its agency marginal 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 was not viable. 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 were telling of the fact that both its allies and

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[56] Jamil Hillal and Taysir Quba Mark Garfield, "Palestinians in Damascus : The Democratic Front and the PFLP," *MERIP Reports*, no. 134 (1985): 15.
[57] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 585.

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 Popular Front, for its part, 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 by 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. In effect, the 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

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[58] *Ibid.,* 589.

[59] "Bayan Sadir ʿan Dawra Ijtimaʿat al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya (Communique Issued from a Series of Meetings of PFLP's Central Committee)", *Al-Hadaf*, no. 806 February 24, 1986, 22–24.

[60] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 791, October 28, 1985, 10–11.

manipulating the conflict to compact his grass-roots 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 in the terms outlined earlier, 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

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[61] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 836, October 13, 1986, 14–15.

[62] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 593.

[63] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 839, November 3, 1986, 4–5; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 843, December 1, 1986, 10–11.

[64] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 846, December 29, 1986, 14–15.

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 Popular Front 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 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 more than six months of 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 were 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. Indeed, the Popular Front had been unable to broker a durable end to the clashes through PNSF negotiation

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[65] Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 228.
[66] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 853, February 23, 1987, 4–5.
[67] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 1997, 606.
[68] Rex Brynen, "Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon," *Westview Press*, 1990, accessed on November 10, 2015, http://prrn.mcgill.ca/research/papers/brynen2_08.htm.
[69] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 860, April 13, 1987, 14–15.
[70] Brynen, "Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon."

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 strongest. 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 positive point that needs to be highlighted was the PFLP's preservation of a certain degree of political autonomy. Unlike the pro-Syrian factions, the Popular Front never considered 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. Especially in the last part of the War of the Camps, the PFLP stressed the importance of Palestinian 'unity on the ground', a protective condition in of Amal's attempt to foster infightings within the Palestinian camp.[71] The adoption of such position was a confirmation that the PFLP rejected PLO intestinal 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 Popular Front 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, as outlined in the previous chapter, the processual and gradual nature of its decline. Indeed, despite the PFLP shifting its orientations and maintaining 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.

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[71] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 851, February 2, 1987, 4–5.

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 Popular Front needed to render 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 US was asserting its 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 Popular Front. Within PFLP discourse and its stand towards Syria and Jordan, 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 US apparently opened space for more frequent contacts between Moscow and the PLO Left, especially with the formation of leftist opposition coalitions. In this context, however, working relations would be improved in the light of tactical interests

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[72] *Al-Taqrir al-Siyasi al-Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya Fi Dawratiha al-Rabiʿa Hawla Harb Lubnan*, PFLP Information Departement, 1983, 123.

rather than long-term ones. Indeed, long-standing Soviet interests and approaches to the Palestinian national movement and the Middle East, as will be shown, prevented strategic collaboration with the PFLP. Ultimately, actual Soviet policies in the post-Beirut phase disavowed the PFLP's analysis of world power balances, contributing to undermining its overall foreign policy strategy.

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

The development of the PFLP's relations with the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s 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. In light of this, an overview of Soviet-Palestinian relations is essential to grasp the evolution of the PFLP's connection with the USSR in the post-Beirut phase.

Unlike Israeli-American relations, the PLO never enjoyed systematic 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 in the late 1960s/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 method of struggle' at their disposal.[74] The Soviet approach towards the Middle East historically favoured relations

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[73] Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon," *Middle East Journal* 40, no. 2 (1986): 285–286.
[74] Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (Oxon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 76.

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, began seeking a rapprochement with the US. Such a shift was meant to counterbalance Sadat's turn towards the US 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]

Concerning PFLP-Soviet relations, the adherence of Habash's organisation to Marxist-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

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[75] Robert O Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East. Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44.

[76] Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 110–111.

[77] Ibid., 113.

[78] Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Israeli Action in Lebanon," *International Affairs* 59, no. 1 (1983): 7–8.

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 Popular Front, 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 the 'international liberation movement' 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 Popular Front, 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 resolution concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict.[83]

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[79] Lillian Craig Harris, "China ' S Relations with the PLO," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 1 (1977): 149; Golan, "The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon," 3–4.
[80] *Cf.* Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East. Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, 28–31.
[81] *Al-ʾIstratijiyya al-Siyasiyya wa al-Tanzimiyya (Political and Organisational Strategy)*, 40–45.
[82] Patricia G. Steinhoff, "Hijackers , Bombers , and Bank Robbers : Managerial Style in the Japanese Red Army", *Journal of Asian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2013): 729–730.
[83] Harris, "China ' S Relations with the PLO," 124–131.

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

Circumstantial Shared Interests and Missed Improvements in PFLP-USSR Relations.

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 to be immobile 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 by local forces. The decision to invade in support of 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 that the Solidarity movement in Poland posed, weakening Soviet grip on the East-European country. Furthermore, in more general terms, the last years of 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 US was the only

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[84] Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East. Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, 71–80.
[85] Stephen E. Hanson, "The Brezhnev Era," in *Cambridge History of Russia. Volume 3. The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 308–309, 311–313.

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 effort 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 Popular Front 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, allowed the PFLP to hope that it would be able to gain more direct Soviet support and notably to exploit the Soviet position to

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[86] Emile F. Sahliyeh, *The PLO after the Lebanon War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 93; Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, "Flexible Militancy: A Report on the Sixteenth Session of the Palestine National Council, Algiers, February 14-22, 1983," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 4 (1983): 33.

[87] Karen Dawisha, "The U.S.S.R in the Middle East: Superpower in Eclipse?," *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 2 (1982): 442–443.

[88] *Al-Taqrir al-Siyasi al-Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya fi Dawratiha al-Rabiʿa Hawla Harb Lubnan (The Political Report Issued by the Fourth General Assembly of PFLP's Central Committee on the War of Lebanon 1983)*, 44–45.

[89] Golan, "The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon," 290–296.

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 clearly-voiced opposition to the 17 May agreement,[90] encouraged the Popular Front 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 the 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] For the Joint Command, whose leaders were received by the Soviet Ambassador to Syria in Damascus shortly after the establishment of the unified leftist leadership, the possibility emerged 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 was not to help the development of the PFLP-Soviet relations. On the one hand the USSR, dissatisfied with Arafat's rapprochement with the US, approved to a certain extent the rebels' claims, closer to the PFLP's position on the matter. On the other, the Soviet Union also opposed the eventuality of a radical PLO under total Syrian control as this would entail a card less in Moscow's hands and 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 Popular Front, 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 would not imply a

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[90] Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East. Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, 148–158.
[91] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 673, May 16, 1983, 4–5; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 677, January 13, 1983, 4.
[92] Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East,* 166–167.
[93] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 680, July 4, 1983, 11.
[94] Golan, "The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon," 296–300.

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 settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The plan did not differ much from the Fez or Brezhnev plans and based on them it affirmed 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 US would enjoy the same 'supervising' status, Habash's organisation had consistently opposed the idea of association with Jordan that it considered as a 'deviation,' endangering 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[98] but they were equally reluctant to support the PFLP's hard line and foster a deeper rift within the PLO. 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

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[95] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 727, June 18, 1984, 11.
[96] Yehuda Lucaks, "The Soviet Union's Proposal on a Middle East Settlement, 29 July 1984," in *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record. 1967-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21–24.
[97] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 691, September 26, 1983, 34–37.
[98] Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East,* 200–210.
[99] Golan, "The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon," 303.

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 Popular Front 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 US 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 reached its end. After initial continuity, the new leader changed attitude in pursuit of 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, on the one hand the Soviets after almost twenty years sought to re-establish minimum contacts with Israel, while on the other expended efforts to improve relations with pro-US regimes such Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf petro-monarchies.[102] Regarding the Palestinian scenario, the Soviet Union's main concern was still embodied by the Amman agreement but, besides that, the explosion 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 US 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

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[100] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 766, April 10, 1985, 16–17; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 778, October 22, 1985, 12–13.
[101] Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East,* 206.
[102] Galia Golan, "Gorbachev's Middle East Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 1 (1987): 42–50.

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. Soviet commitment in this sense was visible through the hosting of 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 Popular Front demonstrated enthusiasm for 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.

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[103] Rashid Khalidi, "Arab Views of the Soviet Role in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 39, no. 4 (1985): 723–724; Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East. Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, 210.
[104] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 774, June 17, 1985, 40.
[105] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 773, June 10, 1985," 12–13.
[106] Galia Golan, "Gorbachev's Middle East Strategy," 50–51.
[107] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 831, September 8, 1986, 35.

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-Egypt 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]

Analysing PFLP-Soviet relations in the mid-1980s and Soviet Middle Eastern policies during this period highlighted that contacts between the parties did not experience substantial improvement. The USSR's adoption of positions acceptable 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 fact, 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. To conclude, while Soviet policies did not have a part in the PFLP's policy fluctuation, this negative pattern affected the Popular Front in its linkages with Moscow.

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[108] "The Tunis Document, Tunis, Tunisia, 16 March 1987," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 4 (1987): 189.

[109] Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, 261.

[110] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 861 April 20, 1987, 12–13.

[111] "Al-Dawra al-Thamina ʿAshara, al-Jazaʾir 20-25/04/1987 (The 18th Session, Algiers, 20-25/04/1987)", *Wafa Info*, accessed June 25, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3250; "The Eighteenth PNC : An Analysis," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 16 (1987): 152–54.

Conclusions.

The history of PFLP-Syria relations showed the tensions affecting PFLP policy making in the mid-1980s. More precisely, in its effort to establish effective political and military coordination with Damascus, the PFLP's oppositional priorities came to the fore and eventually clashed with its internal thrust to maintain integration within the PLO framework. This led to policy fluctuation throughout the unfolding of the PLO split.

In contrast with the PFLP's rhetoric, its interests shared little common ground with Syrian goals. In fact, shared aims existed only in relation to the annulment of the Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement, when Syrian pressure led to the failure of US plans for political settlement in Lebanon. This meant that between mid-1983 and 1986, the PFLP's 'primary contradiction' with Syria, to put it in its own terms, emerged gradually to become a full-fledged dispute with the outbreak of the War of the Camps. Such a contradiction emerged with Syria's first attempt to take over the PLO, exploiting Fatah's internal feud in summer 1983. Although this represented a controversial and hostile step also for the PFLP, which was not directly involved in the conflict, both external and internal factors prevented immediate estrangement from Syria.

Clearly, the relocation of the PFLP's headquarters to Damascus and the concentration of the PFLP's military personnel in the Syrian-controlled Beqaʿa played a central role in this regard. Nonetheless, the PFLP's oppositional priorities largely contributed to avoiding an early break with the Assad regime. The need to maintain a 'revolutionary' profile, the historical goal of constraining the Palestinian rightist leadership, imposing and preserving the 'proper, nationalist line,' as well as the ever-present rivalry with Fatah, are all factors that contributed to the adoption of given positions by the PFLP and its alignment on Syrian stances. This appeared evident in several events analysed throughout this chapter, such as the lack of a clear position towards the Fatah rebels, the intransigence showed during the Aden-Algiers talks and the cautious position at the beginning of the War of the Camps. In summary, the goal of counterbalancing Arafat's agenda on the regional level also counterbalanced the PFLP's concern for Palestinian political autonomy. The DFLP's conduct during

this period highlighted the weight of the PFLP's internal factors in determining its softer position towards Syria. The DFLP, despite experiencing similar Syrian pressure, maintained an overall position closer to Fatah. This was in line with the DFLP's tighter historical collaboration with the PLO leadership compared to the PFLP's hard-line opposition. Hence the conclusion that the PFLP's attitude was equally the consequence of its own priorities as well as of its political tradition. Finally, the increased influence within the PFLP of the Abu Ali Mustafa-led pro-Syrian trend had a more marginal role in the post-Beirut phase. Indeed, while different internal sources denied major rifts over Syrian policies, the changed regional balances and the new situation within the Palestinian national movement had more important weight in the PFLP's calculation towards the Assad regime.

However, despite the predominance of oppositional priorities in the first phases of this period, the PFLP's own thrust towards integration into the PLO resurfaced, in parallel to repeated Syrian aggressions against Palestinian political and military independence. As a result, the PFLP's line appeared uncertain concerning major events shaping Palestinian politics between 1983 and 1987. More precisely, the PFLP's narrative and policies fluctuated between calls and actual dialogue to preserve Palestinian unity and condemnations, coupled with relevant political partnerships, of Arafat's diplomatic strategy. This not only rendered the PFLP's 'radical option' less convincing, but also contributed to Arafat's self-depiction as the only fully independent Palestinian leader, a dynamic that played a paramount role in strengthening his control over the PLO. Finally, the full emergence of contradiction with Syria during the War of the Camps signalled the ultimate PFLP prioritisation of integration within the PLO as well as the definitive shift from its opposition policies. The preservation of Palestinian autonomy prevailed over the PFLP's oppositional priorities, leading to a renewed on-the-ground unity against Amal's attacks. As mentioned earlier, although it underscored the frustration of the PFLP agenda in the post-Beirut phase, its alignment with the PLO mainstream allowed it to retain significant support among the rank-and-file and the wider Palestinian population.

PFLP-USSR relations did not have a similar impact on PFLP agency in terms of policy fluctuation. Thus, analysis of the PFLP's contacts with Moscow between 1983 and 1987 and the place of the Soviet Union in PFLP political discourse, reflects a tactical relationship more than a strategic partnership. This was mainly due to the fact that in Moscow's eyes, the PFLP represented a secondary force within a junior partner, the PLO, that could not be prioritised over Syria, the main Soviet ally in the region. Similarly to relations with Syria, PFLP and Soviet interests coincided only on specific issues, such as rejection of the Lebanese-Israeli agreement or of the so-called Amman agreement, as both risked marginalising the USSR in the context of Arab-Israeli conflict settlement. These circumstantial common interests were telling of the continuity of traditional Soviet goals and approaches towards the Middle East. Indeed, the avoidance of superpower confrontations, the achievement of some role in political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the favouring of strategic relations with the Assad regime remained the paramount drivers of Soviet policies in the mid-1980s.

As a consequence, while the PFLP strived to make the USSR's policies fit into its own narrative, actual Soviet conduct contributed to undermining the viability of the alternative axis that the PFLP aimed at establishing. This was the case during the armed crises that the PLO faced in this period, from Fatah infighting to the War of the Camps, not to mention Soviet inaction during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The lack of direct USSR support to the PLO as a whole, or to those forces that claimed alignment with it, provided hard evidence for Arafat's argument that only the US exerted significant leverage in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Finally, Gorbachev's intention to revive Soviet-Israeli ties was in utter contradiction with the PFLP's position. In addition, the PFLP's own failure to establish a viable, coalesced political entity with other Palestinian leftist factions embodied a further impediment to improving its contacts with the USSR. This meant that the impact of policy fluctuation itself, given its role in such failure, was also felt on the international level.

In conclusion, the opposition-integration dilemma emerged clearly in the PFLP's relations with the Syrian regime. As the PFLP tried to manage its own

contrasting priorities, pressure from Damascus emphasised its policy fluctuation and had an overall negative influence on the PFLP's political effectiveness and credibility in this period. In relation to the Soviet role, while the USSR's influence on the PFLP did not equal Syrian pressures, Moscow's conduct disavowed the PFLP's own narrative. This ultimately jeopardised also the rhetoric that the Popular Front employed to bolster its political line, underscoring the unviability of the PFLP's alternative to the PLO leadership's strategy.

Chapter 3 - The First Intifada. Initial Opportunities, Final Marginalisation.[1]

Introduction.

After the deadlocks and divisions that the Palestinian national movement experienced throughout the 1980s, the outbreak of the First Intifada represented a real lifeline. For 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, reversing the process of marginalisation. With opportunity, however, came new challenges that affected the long-standing patterns characterising the PFLP's agency. More specifically, while the opposition-integration dilemma resurfaced in the new phase and took on deeper dimensions, new sources of tension emphasised its main negative effect, namely policy fluctuation.

The basis for the PFLP's renewed action in the context of the Intifada had its roots in the process of political penetration that the PLO factions experienced in the OPT during the late 1970s and the 1980s. The Popular Front, alongside Fatah and the DFLP, gradually asserted and deepened its presence in occupied Palestine through its work in the framework of trade unions and popular associations. The balances existing between the PLO factions in the diaspora were not reflected 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. Indeed, the definitive acceptance of a political settlement and of the two-state solution, made possible by the pressure of the Intifada on Israel, can be seen through this perspective.

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[1] This chapter represented the basis for the following publication: Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine during the First Intifada: From Opportunity to Marginalization", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (2017), 268-282.

As the uprising achieved some major success during its first year, such as exposing Israel's occupation on a global scale and driving Jordan to abandon its claim on the West Bank, the tensions mentioned earlier started to emerge. The first level of tensions affecting the PFLP was related to policies pursued by Arafat and the PLO leadership. Consistent with its pre-Intifada policies, the PLO Chairman sought to exploit the uprising to obtain talks with the US 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. Consequently, policy fluctuation re-emerged as the PFLP called to radicalise the protest while demonstrating its unwillingness to experience a major break with the PLO leadership, unlike in the mid-1980s.

In addition to this major fault line, new tensions emerged, stemming from the divide between the PFLP 'outside' leadership and its 'inside' base in the OPT, which rose to prominence with the outbreak of the First Intifada. Therefore, divergences between the exiled leadership and the OPT branch over the PFLP's policies toward Arafat and the support of the Intifada directly influenced the scheme of policy fluctuation. Moreover, internal dynamics linked to the old guard's concern for its leadership in the face of the rise of OPT cadres, exacerbated further the inside-outside divide. Besides this, problems of bureaucratisation and rent-seeking also contributed to undermine the PFLP's image in the eyes of the base militants.

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 toward Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (Islamic Jihad), their rise to prominence led the PFLP to question its own oppositional role vis-à-vis Fatah in the Palestinian national movement. This, alongside the aforementioned dynamics, underscored the qualitative development, in terms of negative effect, that the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma underwent during the First Intifada.

Background to the Intifada: The Dynamics of 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. The location 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. The following section looks in particular at the emergence of the PLO-affiliated movement in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, focusing on the central period that went from the second half of the 1970s until the beginning of the First Intifada in 1987. In these years, the national movement acquired those features and spelled out those political priorities that had a direct impact in 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.

After almost three decades since 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.[2] The accident in which an Israeli truck killed four Palestinians represented a spark that set fire to longstanding popular frustration and anger over the increasingly harsh conditions imposed by the occupation and the lack of results after twenty years since the launch of the 'Palestinian revolution'.[3] 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

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[2] This is a reference to the controversy over the nature of the first Intifada that animated academic, media and official circles 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 overemphasize 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 Uprsing - 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).
[3] For a more comprehensive summary of the causes underlying the first Intifada see Part 1 of Jamal R. Nassar and Roger Heacock, eds., *Intifada. Palestine at the Crossroads* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

factions' leaders needed some two weeks to take full control of its activities.[4] However, the efforts expended, mainly by Fatah, the PFLP and the DFLP, to assert and strengthen their presence within the OPT starting from the mid-1970s laid down the premises and the infrastructure for a sustained popular uprising.[5]

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.[6]

The first explicit attempt by the PLO 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 mobilisation of the 'popular masses in the West Bank and Gaza' and stated their 'attention for the organisation of the masses within the trade unions' and more specifically endorsed this latter 'resistance against the Histadrut's (Israel's federation of trade unions) attempts to include Palestinian workers, normalising, in so doing, the occupation.[7] 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 representatives of the national movement. Although its activities had to

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[4] Ziad Abu-amr, "The Palestinian Uprising in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1988): 384.

[5] Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada*, 174–176.

[6] Joost R. Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 46-49, 57-64.

[7] "Al-Dawra Al-ʿAshira Al-Istithnaʾiyya, Al-Qahira (The 10th Extraordinary Session, Cairo)," *Wafa Info*, accessed October 13, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3247.

face tight Israeli repression and several of its exponents underwent arrest or deportation, the PNF put into practice many of the resistance tools that were to spread and be institutionalised during the First Intifada. 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 cheap the Palestinian workforce.[8]

From the foundation of the PNF on, several events underscored the assertion of PLO primacy in the OPT as well as the weight of the 'occupied homeland' that started to enjoy increasing consideration from 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'.[9] Such a decision marked the first break within the PLO as the PFLP suspended its participation in the Executive Committee in protest against the 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.[10] The influence of the PLO continued to increase, scoring a notable result at the 1976 Municipal Elections. The occupation authorities decided to organise this round of electoral consultations in an attempt to create the basis for a Palestinian leadership alternative to the PLO, a longstanding Israeli goal. Nevertheless, this move backfired and, as the PLO decided to support the elections, almost all of its candidate achieved victory and took over the administration of the OPT municipalities.[11] While the PLO was gaining momentum in the OPT as a reference framework, the Popular Front appeared sidelined. Indeed, the PNF leadership mainly included elements of the Jordanian Communist Party (JCP)[12]

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[8] "The Palestinian National Front," *MERIP Reports* 25, no. 25 (1975): 22–23.

[9] "Al-Barnamaj Al-Siyasi Al-Marhalī Li-Munazzama Al-Tahrir Al-Filastiniyya Al-Nuqarrar Min Al-Majlis Al-Watani Fi Dawra Inʿiqadihi Al-Thani ʿAshara (The PLO Interim Program Adopted by the Palestine National Council during Its Twelfth Session 1-8/06/1974)," *Wafa Info*, accessed October 15, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=4897.

[10] Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 62.

[11] Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada*, 45–47.

[12] Between 1948 and 1982, the Palestinian Communists in the OPT were active within the Jordanian Communist Party in the West Bank and within the Palestinian Communist Organization in the Gaza Strip.

like ʿArabi ʿAwwad, and nationalist personalities linked to the DFLP and Fatah, but nobody connected with the PFLP was among its leaders. Furthermore, by rejecting the interim program, the PFLP expressed a position not in line with the majoritarian trend in the OPT. The PLO leadership's stated goal of establishing a national authority in the OPT went along with the efforts of the resistance movement there 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.[13] This initially marginal role, however, did not prevent the PFLP from starting to pursue its own line of action in the OPT. Starting from 1976, the Popular Front 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.[14]

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.[15] However, probably more determining in the collapse of the PNF was the rift between the JCP and the exponents of PLO factions, particularly Fatah. This latter faction 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 did not look with favour at 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

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[13] Weldon Matthews, "The Rise and Demise of the Left in the West Bank Politics: The Case of the Palestine National Front," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1998): 14–18.
[14] Joost Hiltermann, "Mass Mobilization under Occupation : The Emerging Trade Union Movement in the West Bank," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 136 (1985): 29.
[15] Matthews, "The Rise and Demise of the Left in the West Bank Politics: The Case of the Palestine National Front," 20–26.

of the Camp David accords, reflected Fatah's new take on political activism in the OPT. Though still present, the Communists did not exert the same degree of influence they enjoyed within the PNF and their number was reduced. 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.[16] 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 Popular Front tactically allied with the Communists with the aim of limiting Fatah's expansion in the OPT.[17]

Indeed, 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 the Popular Front. Fatah and the DFLP followed the same pattern in the build-up of their activities in the Territories with the foundation of respectively the 'Youth Movement' (ḥarakat al-shabība) and the 'Unity Bloc' (kutlat al-waḥda). In

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[16] Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada*, 48–49.
[17] Muhammad Muslih, "Palestinian Civil Society," *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 2 (1993): 262.

embarking on this enterprise, the PLO factions challenged the primacy of the Communists and their 'Progressive Bloc' (al-kutla al-taqaddumiyya), so far 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 of Palestinian politics in all of its expressions, 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. Indeed, 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 what can be considered an effort to 'buy' the loyalty of the OPT leadership, especially that of the traditional bourgeois elites.[18] Consequently, the PFLP and the other leftist organisations focused on mass organisation, an orientation that proved to be a remarkable asset at the eruption of the Intifada when the traditional intra-Palestinian balances of power underwent some shifts, at least initially.

After 1982 and the destruction of the PLO sanctuary in Lebanon, the 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 re-established the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) underscoring the rise in prominence of the OPT.[19] 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 Popular Front 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 hesitancies concerning a new National Front, the PFLP was indirectly attacking Fatah and Arafat for their contacts with King Hussein and the sudden return of

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[18] Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada*, 50–51, 78–79.
[19] Alain Gresh and Diane Belle James, "Review: Palestinian Communists and the Intifadah," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 157 (1989): 36.

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.[20]

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 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.[21] The correspondence between political fragmentation, factionalism and greater popular politicisation was fully, and probably more clearly, visible in the field of women's mobilisation. In fact, 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 in order 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

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[20] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 658, January 31, 1983, 24–25.
[21] Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada*, 84–89.
[22] Ibid., 132–135.

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. Indeed, 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, these prisoners started to organise themselves according to political affiliations. The 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, the 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. The PF-GC, after the capture of four Israeli soldiers in Lebanon negotiated successfully the liberation of approximately 1500 Palestinian militants belonging to all political factions active in the OPT. Those who were liberated in that occasion played a prominent role in the build-up of the resistance infrastructure in the years preceding the Intifada.[26]

This overview of the development of the national movement in the OPT highlights those features that enabled the PFLP to play an active role in the

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[23] Islah Jad, "From Salons to the Popular Committees: Palestinian Women 1919-1989," in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, ed. Jamal R. Nassar and Roger Heacock (New York: Praeger, 1990), 131–132.

[24] Samih K. Farsoun and Jean M. Landis, "Structures of Resistance and the 'War of Position': A Case Study of the Palestinian Uprising," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1989): 64–67.

[25] Rashid Khalidi, "The Uprising and the Palestine Question," *World Policy Journal* 5, no. 3 (1988): 500.

[26] Helena Cobban, "The PLO and the 'Intifada,'" *The Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (1990): 212.

Intifada while at the same time 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 uncovered a plan he was coordinating to acquire weapons for the organisation from the Israeli black market in preparation for the first MB armed operations against the occupier.[27] During the previous decade and in the remaining years before the uprising, Yassin became a key figure in the Islamists' expanding role in Palestinian society. The MB build-up efforts paralleled, if 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 as a whole and had a deep impact on the trajectory of the Palestinian Left. Indeed, such a 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 committing effectively to resistance against Israel, Palestinian society needed to be 're-Islamised' since the spread of

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[27] Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas. A History from Within* (Northampton, Massachussetts: Olive Branch Press, 2011), 45–47.
[28] Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000).

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 the Palestinian favour 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 that allowed MB activities in the hope of impeding 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] Indeed, their 'first public platform,' the Islamic Society (al-jamʿiyya al-islāmiyya), 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 their activities without significant disruption. Thus, in 1973, the Brotherhood decided to set up a new organisation with wider scope in terms of activities and geographic diffusion. The creation of al-Mujammaʿ al-Islāmī (the Islamic Centre), based in Gaza, enabled the MB to control virtually all the religious institutions and organization 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 occasion to bring

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[29] Loren B. Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 80–81.

[30] Tamimi, *Hamas. A History from Within*, 20–21.

[31] Ziad Abu-Amr, "Hamas: A Historical and Political Background," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (1993): 7.

the MB in confrontation with Fatah. Indeed, the Brotherhood 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 is 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 in intra-Palestinian feuds.[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-Mujammaʿ laid the foundations for broad, youthful popular support in Gaza.[34] Meanwhile, Shaykh Yassin reserved harsh attacks for the PLO, rejecting categorically any cooperation with its factions, and the Israeli authorities turned a blind eye on the Islamists' activities as far as they did not

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[32] Tamimi, *Hamas. A History from Within*, 39–40.

[33] Interview with ʿIssam Hijjawi, former PFLP-OPT Cadre, Edinburgh, October 24, 2015. View also upheld in Michael Irving Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas : A Grassroots Perspective* (London: London : Tauris, 2009), 16–17.

[34] Ann M. Lesch, "Prelude to the Uprising in the Gaza Strip," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 1 (1990): 9.
Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrel, *Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 43-47.

pose a threat to Israel and fostered intra-Palestinian divisions. This could not but contribute to 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 members of Fatah, 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 weapons, and the necessary measure of sending some militants to Jordan for military training. The MB plan to obtain military material which was foiled by the Israeli security services and led to Yassin's detention, was part of this larger project. Despite the partial failure, the project laid the foundations 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.

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[35] Lesch, "Prelude to the Uprising in the Gaza Strip," 9–10.
[36] Wissam Alhaj, Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, and Eugénie Rebillard, *De La Théologie À La Liberation? Histoire Du Jihad Islamique Palestinien* (Paris: La Découvert, 2014). 20-21, 45-47.
[37] Tamimi, *Hamas. A History from Within*, 43–47.

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

As the previous sections have shown, 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 longstanding 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. Therefore, views that depicted the PLO as either an external agitating force, unrelated to the national movement in the OPT, or as the only maker of the Intifada, do not reflect the political reality on the ground in the late 1980s.

The ever-increasing harshness of Israeli repressive measures and the steady decline of the economic situation in the Territories 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 allowed a new phase in Palestinian politics to arise. 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 Popular Front 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 so far failed.

However, the political scenario that the Intifada shaped had a direct impact on longstanding dynamics affecting the PFLP, and brought to the fore new sources of tensions. In light of this, the remaining parts of this chapter, after outlining the PFLP's initial pragmatic response to the outbreak of the Intifada and its participation in the debate that it sparked, will address the re-emerging

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[38] F. Robert Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 47–57.

and strengthening of the opposition-integration dilemma and its interconnection with the new tensions which emerged in the context of the Intifada. In following the conduct of the PFLP throughout the first three years of the Intifada, attention will be focused on the continuation of the policy fluctuation pattern and its detrimental effect on 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 lead 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. Highlighting the PFLP's conduct during the first year of the Intifada is all the more relevant as it contrasts 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 were still those that characterised the period subsequent to the reconciliatory 18th PNC. The Popular Front 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] Consequently, the PFLP kept stressing the centrality of armed operations against Israel as the most

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[39] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1997), 614. [Abbreviate 2nd and following refs]
[40] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 890, November 30, 1987, 4–5.

156

effective means to stop the renewed efforts of many Arab regimes that were once again betting on American-sponsored political solutions. On the very eve of the Intifada, while praising a spectacular operation carried out by a PF-GC commando on an Israeli military base, the PFLP still called for the '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 of protests 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' (maḥaṭṭa nawʿiyya).[42] This definition became recurrent in the PFLP's narrative 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 to 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 Popular Front called for international intervention in the OPT, demanding that the United Nations dispatch observers in order to testify to Israel's violation of 'UN

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[41] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 891 December 7, 1987, 4.
[42] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 893 December 24, 1987, 4–5.
[43] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 895, January 17, 1988, 9.

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 establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the OPT.[45] The leadership of the uprising started to articulate these goals regularly through the distribution of leaflets that were to become the fundamental organising tool of the Intifada. More significantly, the Intifada succeeded in attracting global attention and in particular that of the UN Security Council that issued three different 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 in order 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] On the one hand, 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 continuous escalation of the uprising, the reaffirmation of PLO authority in the OPT, the establishment of an institutional framework capable of challenging and

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[44] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 893 December 24, 1987 7.
[45] Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means*, 2–3.
[46] Security Council, "Resolution 605," 1987, http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/d744b47860e5c97e85256c40005d01d6/a734f62e7c6f8ef9852560de00695c66?OpenDocument; Security Council, "Resolution 607," 1988, http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/d744b47860e5c97e85256c40005d01d6/0e9a50978a6d5440852560de00694276?OpenDocument; Security Council, "Resolution 608," 1988, http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/d744b47860e5c97e85256c40005d01d6/d8fa18138e513565852560dd00642451?OpenDocument.
[47] *Al Hadaf*, no. 900, February 21, 1988, 32–34.
[48] Abu-amr, "The Palestinian Uprising in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," 384–385; Khalidi, "The Uprising and the Palestine Question," 503–507.

substituting that of the occupier and the diplomatic efforts needed on the international level to progress the demands voiced by the insurgency. 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 some smaller PLO 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 the cohesion of 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, at least apparently, the uprising was reshuffling the power balance among these forces, limiting Fatah supremacy, particularly in relation to the PFLP.[51]

Therefore, the Popular Front 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 confrontation was related to the timing, mode and scope of the PLO political initiative to settle the conflict, or in other words, how did the PLO have to act in order to 'capitalise' on the Intifada.[52] For its part, the Popular Front had already gradually accepted the idea of an international peace conference in the years preceding the Intifada as outlined in the previous chapter. After December 1987 however, as the UNLU stated clearly among its goals the

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[49] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 895, January 17, 1988, 7–9.
[50] Rashid Khalidi, "The PLO and the Uprising," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 154 (1988): 22.
[51] Abu-amr, "The Palestinian Uprising in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip", 400.
[52] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 616.

achievement of a settlement through the international peace conference[53], this became a systematic demand for the PFLP, though with specific requirements. In its positioning within the debate, the Popular Front did not adopt a hard-line position. The PFLP stated several times during the first year of the Intifada 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 undeniable achievement of the Intifada, the balance of power, especially on 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 readiness to enter into bilateral talks with Israel or even to officially recognise it 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 US or even Israel and the PLO was needed. Despite their PLO connection, the most prominent among them, such as Siniora or the Birzeit University Professor Sari Nusseibeh, were directly dependent on Arafat's guidance, thus the UNLU and the rest of the PLO external leadership

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[53] "Bayan Raqm 10 (Leaflet no. 10)," *Wafa Info*, 1988, accessed September 28, 2015 http://www.wafainfo.ps/pdf/bayan_10.pdf .
[54] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 917, July 3, 1988, 16.
[55] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 924, August 28, 1988, 4–6.
[56] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 917, July 3, 1988, 16–18.
[57] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 898, February 7, 1988, 4–8.

had little influence on their initiatives.[58] From this stemmed the PFLP's scepticism toward these personalities who in Abu Ali Mustafa's words were 'more inclined toward American solutions'.[59] Habash himself admonished 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 Palestinian masses'.[60] However, it is worth remarking that the PFLP addressed its most virulent critiques to Bassam Abu Sharif, a close Arafat advisor since he left the Popular Front.[61] The reason for such attacks is to be found in the so-called Abu Sharif document, an article in which he underlined the shared interests in peace and security of the Palestinian and the Israeli peoples, as well as affirmed the PLO's acceptance of UN resolutions 242 and 338 and its availability to start direct negotiations.[62] The PFLP harshly condemned the document, even with a Politburo Communique, and demanded the intervention of the PLO Executive Committee to 'protect politically the Intifada from these distortions' which were 'outside the national consensus' and 'whitewashed Israel's true repressive face'.[63] The harsh denunciation of Abu Sharif might have stemmed from quarrels within the PFLP itself. Other personalities expressed provocative stances but Abu Sharif was by far the most criticised – a condemnation that was fully satisfied as the PLO Leadership disavowed his calls. This episode echoed the possible existence of divisions between 'moderates' and 'hard-liners' which affected the Popular Front in the early 1980s and in the post-Beirut phase.[64] 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

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[58] Ziad Abu-Amr, "The ' Personalities ' of the Occupied Territories : Notes on Palestinian Political Leadership," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 154 (1988): 24–25.
[59] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 898, February 7, 1988, 4–8.
[60] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 902, March 6, 1988, 8–9.
[61] Bassam Abu Sharif started to lose influence within the PFLP in the 1980s due to his views on Palestinian diplomatic strategy deemed too close to Arafat's agenda. These divergences led Abu Sharif to leave the PFLP in 1987 and become an adviser to the PLO Chairman. He also became a strong advocate of the Oslo accords.
[62] Bassam Abu Sharif, "Prospects of a Palestinian-Israeli Settlement, Algiers,7 June 1988.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 1 (1988): 272–275.
[63] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha (Political Communique Issued by the PFLP's Politburo)", *Al-Hadaf*, no. 916, July 26, 1988, 4–5; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 917, July 3, 1988," 4–5.
[64] *See Chapter 2 and* Asʿad AbuKhalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 367–370.

as Bassam al-Shakʿa, the legitimate elected Nablus Mayor deposed by the Israeli government, or the Gaza Red Crescent President Haidar ʿAbd 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.[65]

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 possible new institutional frameworks that could 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.[66] 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.[67] However, the Popular Front 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 break 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 development program worth 1.3 billion dollars. 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 by the relinquishing of Jordan's links with the West Bank.[68] While considering such a development as a direct result of the Intifada, the PFLP showed all its historical distrust toward

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[65] Abu-Amr, "The 'Personalities' of the Occupied Territories, 24; *Al-Hadaf,* n. 897, January 31, 1988, 12–13*; Al-Hadaf,* no. 919, July 18, 1988, 26–27; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 921, August 7, 1988, 8–10.

[66] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 616.

[67] Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha (Political Communique Issued by the PFLP's Politburo)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 895, January 17, 1988, 4–6.

[68] "King Hussein, Speech on the West Bank, Amman, 3 July 1988," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 1 (1988): 279–283.

the Jordanian regime. According to the Popular Front, King Hussein's step aimed at putting pressure on the PLO. George Habash in a public letter clarified 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.[69] 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 program and respond to international pressures that urged the recognition of Israel as a base for negotiations.[70] 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.[71] Although the PFLP refused to adopt the PNC Political Statement because of its recognition of the

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[69] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 922, August 14, 1988, 4–10.
[70] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 928, September 25, 1988, 4–5.
[71] "Palestine National Council, 'Palestinian Declaration of Independence', Algiers, 15 November 1988," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 2 (1989): 213–216; "Palestine National Council, 'Political Communique', Algiers, 15 November 1988.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 2 (1989): 216–223. For an in-depth analysis of the 19th PNC resolution see*:* Rashid Khalidi, "The Resolutions of the 19th Palestine National Council," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 19, no. 2 (1990): 29–42.

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 contrivers stand concerning armed struggle. The Secretary-General affirmed that the PFLP wanted to preserve the 'popular nature (*ṭabīʿa jamāhīriyya*)' 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.[72] The shift made by the PFLP was also evident in its arguments against UN Resolutions 242 and 338. While reaffirming the longstanding 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' explicated by these resolutions, marking the prioritisation of the diplomatic initiative, a position that the pre-Intifada PFLP always refused to adopt.[73]

Throughout the first hectic year of the Intifada the PFLP demonstrated itself capable of aligning itself with the priorities that the uprising itself articulated. From this stemmed its new rhetoric and positions concerning the end of the occupation and the political limits for settlement of the conflict. However, as the next sections will show in detail, the PLO leadership's attempts to reap the benefits of the Intifada in terms of diplomatic initiative contributed to the re-emergence of problematic aspects affecting 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.

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[72] "Al-Hakim fī Muqabala maʿa Sahifa al-Anbaʾ al-Lubnaniyya (Al-Hakim in an Interview with the Lebanese Newspaper Al-Anba)," *Al-Hadaf,* no. 938*,* December 4, 1988, 7–11.
[73] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 940, December 25, 1988, 60–71.

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 ultimate goal was opening a dialogue with the US.[74] 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, called for elections in the OPT to individuate a Palestinian delegation team.[75] Secondly, the Baker plan, a revised, more complicated version of the previous initiative, 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.[76]

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

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[74] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 638.

[75] Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means*, 177–181.

[76] Joe Stork and Rashid Khalidi, "Washington's Game Plan in the Middle East," *MERIP Middle East Report* 164/165, no. 1 (1990): 11.

costs of the protests, but also to reassert its military control over the administration of the OPT which the Intifada strived to challenge since its inception.[77] 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.[78] 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.[79] 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 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.[80] 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. Indeed, the difficulties that Arafat faced in pursuing his line appeared to be confirmation of the PFLP's scepticism over the US' real intentions. Besides, the escalating trend of the uprising apparently demonstrated the ability of the Popular Front 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

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[77] Joost Hiltermann, "Israel's Strategy to Break the Uprising," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 19, no. 2 (1990): 87.
[78] Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means*, 202–203.
[79] William B. Quandt, *Peace Process. American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington D.C. - Los Angeles: Brookings Institution, University of California Press, 2005), 296–297.
[80] Salim Tamari, "Limited Rebellion and Civil Society: The Uprising's Dilemma," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 164/165 (1990): 5.

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 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.

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.[81] 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. In the context of the Intifada, the PFLP's unclear positioning over the PLO Chairman's diplomatic strategy was 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

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[81] Tamari, "Limited Rebellion and Civil Society: The Uprising's Dilemma", 7-8.

speech to mark the 21st anniversary of the PFLP's establishment, George Habash openly called for the 'radicalisation of the Intifada'.[82] At the same time, the Popular Front stated clearly its position within the internal Palestinian debate over PLO political strategy as it declared its determination to 'hold the concessions in check'.[83] 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.[84] In a display of self-confidence, Habash affirmed in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir* that the Popular Front 'would have seen the failure of Arafat's line towards the US in due course'.[85] However, the PFLP leadership did not maintain such a defiant position, as it did not appear prone to confront Fatah as it had in the phase preceding the Intifada. Since the first steps of US-Palestinian dialogue, the official PFLP line alternated between criticism and some positive evaluations. For instance, the US acceptance of talks with Palestinian representatives might be seen as a successful result of the Intifada. After two years the Intifada 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 US as an '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.[86]

The alternation of criticism and praise was in conjunction with the evolution of Arafat's diplomatic strategy and reflected internal opposite thrusts pushing at

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[82] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 941, January 9, 1989, 4–11.
[83] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 942, Jauary 10, 1989, 4–5.
[84] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Communique Issued by PFLP's Politburo)", *Al-Hadaf*, no. 942, January 10, 1989, 22–23.
[85] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 944, January 29, 1989, 6–11.
[86] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 942, January 10, 18–21.

different times for a confrontational or a reconciliatory approach. As indirect PLO-US talks continued on a regular basis, the Popular Front 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 being in disagreement 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.[87]

The PLO Chairman and his Deputy Salah Khalaf continued to encourage indirect dialogue with the Bush administration with some fairly courageous 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.[88] 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'.[89] 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 Palestine 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 US, it is difficult not to see it as a way to pressure the PLO leadership vis-à-vis its American counterpart, after Arafat's

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[87] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 947, February 19, 1989, 14–17; "Bayan Raqm 34 (Leaflet N. 34)", *Wafa Info,* accessed November 28, 2015, http://www.wafainfo.ps/pdf/bayan_34.pdf .

[88] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 949, March 5, 1989, 4–5; "Salah Khalaf, Address (via Video Tape) to the International Center for Peace in the Middle East, Jerusalem, 22 February 1989.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 4 (1989): 153–155.

[89] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 950, March 12, 1989, 4–5.

renouncement of 'terrorism'.[90] 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.[91] 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 Popular Front 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.[92]

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[93], 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

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[90] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 948, February 26, 1989, 6–8.
[91] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 955, April 16, 1989, 12–13.
[92] Tamari, "Limited Rebellion and Civil Society: The Uprising's Dilemma," 4.
[93] Quandt, *Peace Process. American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, 296–297.

elections in the OPT, hinting at a possibility of debating the Shamir-Baker plan[94] 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.[95] 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.[96] 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 Popular Front even accepted the idea of a referendum to decide whether the National Charter could be amended or not.[97] Keeping divisions within the boundaries of ordinary PLO debate was evidently a priority for the PFLP leadership.

In accordance with this principle, the Popular Front 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 US and Israel emerged during the indirect talks.[98] 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

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[94] "Yasir Arafat's 'Caduc' Interview, Paris, 2 May 1989.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 19, no. 2 (1990): 144–146.

[95] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 957, May 5, 1989, 8.

[96] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha (Political Communique Issued by the PFLP's Politburo)", *Al-Hadaf*, no. 959, 1989, 4–6.

[97] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 959, May 21, 1989, 8–9.

[98] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 973, September 3, 1989, 8–9.

state as the 'base for the Palestinian peace project'.[99] 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'.[100] 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.[101] 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.

As has been shown in the first section of this chapter, the Popular Front was capable of building a significant, grassroots presence in the OPT throughout the 1980s, ensuring its participation in the UNLU after the outbreak of the Intifada. 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.[102] Clearly, the political status of the PFLP-OPT was also raised due to directly engaging in the effort to sustain the

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[99] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1005, May 5, 1990, 5.
[100] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 992, January 28, 1990, 18–24.
[101] Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means*, 205.
[102] Cobban, "The PLO and the 'Intifada,'" 208–212.

uprising. 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 which had clear repercussions for its agency.

During the first months of the uprising coordination between the PFLP-OPT and the exiled leadership worked smoothly. As was the case for the other factions, the PFLP was interested in empowering further its structure in the OPT, widening the dimensions and scope of the Popular Committees. The Popular Front also needed to demonstrate tight bonds between the inside and outside in order to respond to hostile propaganda that was trying to discredit the PLO by denying its involvement in the Intifada. To disavow such claims, the PFLP stressed the liaison role played by the Popular Committees as well as emphasised that the inside leadership acknowledged the legitimacy of the PLO.[103] 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.[104] 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 trend was observable in all the main PLO factions and the PFLP was no exception.[105] 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

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[103] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 895, January 17, 1988 7–9.
[104] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 898, February 7, 1988, 12–15.
[105] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 635–636.

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, as was outlined earlier, 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, dissatisfaction grew within the PFLP-OPT and the overall popularity of the faction started to shrink.[106]

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.[107] 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.[108] 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

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[106] Interview with former PFLP-OPT Cadre ʿIssam Hijjawi, Edinburgh, November 5, 2015.
[107] Tamari, "Limited Rebellion and Civil Society: The Uprising's Dilemma," 6–8.
[108] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 988, December 24, 1989, 51; *Al-Hadaf*, no 1009, June 1, 1990, 11–13; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1013, July 10, 1990, 9–11.

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.[109]

Moreover, to a certain extent the external leadership started to appear alienated 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.[110]

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.[111] The divide between the

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[109] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 991, January 21, 1990, 4–5.
[110] "Communique of the PFLP in the Occupied Territories," *Al-Hadaf,* no. 952, March 26, 1989, 32–33; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 996, February 25, 1990, 16.
[111] *Cf.* Jamil Hilal, "PLO Institutions : The Challenge Ahead," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 1 (1993): 55.

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 toward the peace process, and in the meaning of the PFLP's opposition to Fatah, notably in the light of Hamas' ascendance as the Arafat faction's main competitor.[112]

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 in particular Hamas, launching the first serious challenge to the dominant secular nationalist factions in order to gain predominance in the Palestinian political arena. As evidence 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. Particularly 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.[113] As regards the PFLP, the challenge was twofold inasmuch as the Islamists were not only ideologically at odds with the Popular Front, 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 the PFLP's popular base, the Front 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.[114] The PFLP, at least during the first years of the

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[112] Interview with former PFLP-OPT Cadre ʿIssam Hijjawi, Edinburgh, November 9, 2015.
[113] Hunter, *The Palestinian Uprising. A War by Other Means*, 116–117.
[114] Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrel, *Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement,* 50-58.

Intifada, also underestimated the Islamists' challenge, particularly in Hamas' case, to PLO primacy. 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 the end of 1988, when competition within the Palestinian camp started to be more evident in the light of the PLO's 'peace offensive'. At this stage the Popular Front was very critical toward Hamas because of its decision to act outside the framework of the UNLU. As Deputy Secretary-General Abu Ali Mustafa maintained, 'Hamas' refusal to join the national institution was causing its retreat from the Intifada because popular consensus stood with the slogans and priorities set by the PLO-affiliated organisations'.[115] 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 Popular Front 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 in the Territories, Hamas' position was seen as an attempt to benefit from a possible weakening of the PLO.[116]

Notwithstanding the conflicting positions, the PFLP started to change its attitude toward the Islamists by virtue of both their growing popularity among

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[115] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 929, October 2, 1988, 4–9.
[116] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 951, March 19, 1989, 20–21.

the masses and divergences with the PLO leadership concerning the line to support the Intifada diplomatically. The Popular Front shared Fatah's goal of containing Hamas' growth as the new radical actor.[117] 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.[118] The new approach demonstrated that the Popular Front understood its relations with Hamas through the traditional pattern of intra-Palestinian relations. As had been the case with Fatah on several occasions, political and ideological differences could be downplayed in the 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[119], it was very unlikely that Hamas would embrace it, especially because of its bid for predominance within Palestinian politics. In fact, 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.[120]

The PFLP's attempts to nurture more positive contacts with the Islamist camp combined with a certain adoption of Islamist rhetoric. The Popular Front's leaders started to quote figures like ʿOmar ibn al-Khuttab and Shaikh ʿIzz 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 how the Popular Front legitimised the emerging Islamist movement as an historical part of Palestinian nationalism. Furthermore, they also embodied the PFLP's willingness to address an allegedly more 'Islamised Palestinian public'.[121]

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[117] Tamimi, *Hamas. A History from Within*, 57–61; 187–190.
[118] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1004, April 22, 1990, 9–11; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1012, July 1, 1990, 18–19.
[119] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 253–258.
[120] Ibid., 657.
[121] *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1012, July 1, 1990, 5; *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1014, July 22, 1990, 8–9.

This first look at the PFLP's attitude towards the rising Islamist movement in the first years of the Intifada highlights the adoption of a shifting line and a misconception of the challenge that Hamas in particular represented against 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 Popular Front as a junior part in attempts at association that followed the Oslo accords.[122] The PFLP's unquestionable loyalty to the PLO further complicated its positioning toward the Islamists and in general within the Palestinian national movement. The traditional role of 'loyal opposition'[123] 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 Popular Front'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.

This account of the PFLP's conduct during the first three years of the Intifada pointed out the inability of the organisation to take advantage of its relatively stronger position in the context of Palestinian politics in the OPT and of the Intifada itself. The outbreak of the uprising, while setting the priority of achieving a political settlement of the conflict, opened up the possibility of a

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[122] Milton-Edwards and Farrel, *Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement,* 153–154; Anders Strindberg, "The Damascus Based Alliance of Palestinian Forces: A Primer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 60–63.
[123] Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle without: The Transformation of PLO Politics since 1982," *International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (1989): 248.

settlement without the danger of Jordanian interference and with the PLO on an equal footing vis-à-vis all the actors involved. In light of such development, the PFLP showed pragmatism in adapting its line to the objectives articulated by the movement in the OPT. This, while reflecting the PFLP's entrenchment in the OPT, also demonstrated a certain ability to renew its political line and discourse. Therefore, considering Arafat's precipitous willingness to enter into negotiations, the Popular Front had a chance to emerge as the revolutionary, committed force within the PLO, possibly widening its popularity in the OPT, by protecting with greater force the revolutionary ethos of the Intifada and mounting a more convincing opposition to the PLO leadership's efforts to capitalise on the uprising. This is particularly true if one takes into consideration the radicalisation that the uprising experienced in its second year. Israeli repression, the hesitation of US-Palestinian dialogue, and popular scepticism towards the peace process were all factors that might have played in the PFLP's interests.

In understanding the causes of such failure, the pattern of policy fluctuation emerges again as a central point. While new sources of tension fostered the PFLP's fluctuations in the context of the First Intifada, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to have an overall influence on its agency. Consequently, the negative dynamic of fluctuations affected the PFLP repeatedly during the first phase of the uprising.

First, the external PFLP leadership was unwilling to cause another split in the PLO, after what the national movement had experienced during the mid-1980s in terms of intra-Palestinian armed confrontations, Arafat's 'individualist' turn and the self-exclusion of the PFLP from the highest PLO institutional bodies. Furthermore, as the Islamist camp started to pose a serious threat to the status of nationalist-secular forces, the PFLP leadership favoured cohesion with the PLO Right, rather than really challenging the latter's dominant position. In this approach, it is possible to identify 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 it from breaking with the PLO mainstream,

notwithstanding its violations and authoritarian policies.[124] As a consequence, the PFLP's policies toward the PLO leadership appeared uncertain and unclear, as the stances adopted during the 19th PNC and in relation to US-Israel-PLO indirect dialogue exemplified.

Secondly, the tension stemming from the PFLP's own 'inside-outside' divide contributed to policy fluctuation. On this level, the PFLP external leadership's concern for integration in the PLO combined with other factors to undermine its overall political strength. Consequently, while officially calling for nation-wide civil disobedience, the PFLP leadership did not challenge directly Arafat's policies as the PFLP-OPT wished. As a result, the external leadership did not favour radicalisation of the protests, in contrast with its official line. Such reluctance ultimately distanced the two segments of the PFLP. This approach of the 'outside' was also the result of the exiled leaders' unwillingness to foster a new generation of cadres capable of threatening their control over the organisation. In addition, the phenomena of bureaucratisation and rent-seeking that started to affect the PFLP also fostered doubts among the base militants and jeopardised the credibility of PFLP political action.

Finally, the PFLP maintained an unclear position toward the Islamists and notably Hamas, shifting from total rejection to attempts to cultivate friendly contacts as the Islamists asserted their prominence in the Palestinian political landscape. The rise of the Islamist camp, as it became clearer in the following years, exacerbated the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma. On the one hand, the emergence of a Palestinian force outside the PLO aroused the PFLP's concern for the preservation of PLO integration, and the relevance stemming from it. On the other, it started to question the PFLP's own oppositional role. The PFLP's fluctuations in relation to the Islamist camp inevitably undermined the effectiveness of the party's agency and proved a further burden in the task of relaunching its role within the Palestinian national movement.

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[124] Haidar Eid, "Dis-Participation as a Palestinian Strategy?," *Al-Shabaka*, 2013 accessed November 17, 2015, https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/dis-participation-as-a-palestinian-strategy/; Osamah Khalil, "'Who Are You?': The PLO and the Limits of Representation," *Al-Shabaka* , 2013 accessed November 17, 2015, https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/who-are-you-plo-and-limits-representation/.

To conclude, the evolution of the PFLP's line during the first three years of the Intifada reflected its inability to fully exploit this chance to renew its political initiative and weight. Although the uprising continued until the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993, the PFLP had by 1990 expended most of the political capital accumulated during the 1980s and the first year of the Intifada. Ultimately this missed opportunity had a paramount effect on the definitive marginalisation experienced by the PFLP in the following years. In addition, as a further negative fallout, the First Intifada definitively transformed the PFLP's adherence to the PLO framework from a positive asset to a controversial aspect.

Chapter 4 - The Peace Process Era: From Rejection to Acceptance.

Introduction.

The tensions and their consequences outlined in the previous chapters continued to act on the PFLP throughout the 1990s. By the same token, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to permeate the sources of pressure directly affecting the PFLP. In fact, from beginning to end, the decade addressed in this chapter emphasised the dilemma. More specifically, major external events, from the Gulf War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 to the 1993 Oslo accords, and internal PFLP responses, complicated its relationship of conflict and dependence with Palestinian institutions. Furthermore, the Oslo era, as will be shown, saw the strengthening of those tensions that appeared during the uprising, such as the contrast between the Damascus-based leadership and the PFLP-OPT or the polarisation between the Arafat-led 'peace camp' and the strengthening 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 the specific issues mentioned.

The first setting for the PFLP's predicament was its own Fifth National Congress, held in 1993. On this occasion, the PFLP demonstrated its inability to renew its theoretical background, its organisational structure, and its political program. On this occasion, some of the tensions evidenced above, such as the PFLP's dependence on the PLO framework, the bureaucratisation of its structure and the outside-inside divide, forged a conservative approach in the leadership which prevented genuine change.

The PLO and Israel's signing of the Declaration of Principle (DoP) in September 1993 concretised those 'liquidatory' solutions that the PFLP rejected throughout its history. Its response to this, however, reflected the PFLP's dependence on the PLO framework notwithstanding the unprecedented turn taken by its leadership. Indeed, the PFLP tried to delegitimise the Oslo peace process on the PLO institutional level by trying to coalesce opposition to the

accords and boycotting the Oslo-derived institutions and procedures. The main result of this orientation was the establishment of the Unified Leadership with the DFLP, a renewed version of coalition politics.

However, as this chapter aims at illustrating, this policy line appeared not only ineffective but also highlighted the PFLP's inconsistencies and fluctuations in formulating its agenda. As a result, at the end of the decade, the PFLP's own political role appeared under question, as its opposition proved ineffective in influencing the course of PLO policy. In outlining the unfolding of this trajectory, the present chapter will address the main levels on which the PFLP's agency reflected the influence of the opposition-integration dilemma while at the same time, strengthening it.

First, the ineffectiveness of the PFLP's institutional opposition to the Oslo accords and its state-building process evidenced its main contradictory shift. As the Popular Front failed to delegitimise Arafat's agenda, it started to give mixed signals of acceptance of the new political reality quite early on, raising doubts about its role in the new scenario. Secondly, the PFLP's institutional orientation contradicted its own calls for grassroots resistance to Oslo and the PNA. Besides reflecting the results of the PFLP's main dilemma, this approach also revealed the external leadership's tensions with cadres in the OPT. The growing estrangement from local leaders and activists further undermined its oppositional role and overall political weight. This was all the more evident as the Islamist factions, and particularly Hamas, continued to bolster their presence on the grassroots level. The PFLP's adherence to the PLO framework itself represented a major obstacle for the establishment of working relations with the Islamist factions, particularly Hamas. While the latter upheld its challenge to the PLO status, the PFLP embarked on an uncertain association attempt that did not produce actual policies. As a result, the PFLP's fluctuations became evident when the Front promptly disengaged from the failing coalition with the Islamists to reopen dialogue with Fatah. Finally, the failure of institutional opposition undermined the longest example of PFLP-DFLP coalition. Again, in contradiction with the narrative and policies adopted in the wake of the Oslo

accords, the PFLP and DFLP started separate talks with Fatah aimed at reaching a settlement on the reorganisation of their presence in the OPT.

Ultimately, this chapter will show how the PFLP's conduct in the 1990s led to its *de facto* acceptance of the post-Oslo political regime, which complicated its association with Palestinian institutions, mostly due to the contradictory relation with the PNA. Simultaneously, however, it also exacerbated its condition as an opposition faction in the light of Hamas' definitive assertion as radical opponent to the PLO leadership.

A Weakened PLO.

The overall precarious condition that characterised the PLO at the beginning of the 1990s clearly had a direct impact on the PFLP. Therefore, to assess correctly the limits of the Popular Front's conduct in this phase, it is necessary to outline briefly those external developments that affected the Palestinian national movement negatively. Such events, which marked the final years of the First Intifada, paved the way to the exacerbation of the PFLP's own dilemmas.

The PNC's 20th session was convened from 23-28 September 1991, three years after the 19th, 'Intifada session' that declared the independence of the State of Palestine. This declaration symbolised 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 could not be considered concluded, the PLO appeared severely weakened, a condition clearly reflected in the outcome of the new PNC session. If during the 19th PNC, the PLO proposed its own peace initiative and made its bid for statehood clear through the declaration of independence, the 20th session merely provided a positive response to US Secretary of State Baker's proposal to convene a regional peace conference, underscoring the passive stance of the PLO. 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 the absence of any delegate from Jerusalem and the diaspora.[1] Although this meant diluting the

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[1] William B. Quandt, *Peace Process. American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, Third Edit (Washington D.C. - Los Angeles: Brookings Institution Press- University of California Press, 2005), 308.

PLO's representative role and possibly excluding many Palestinians from the solution, the Palestinian leadership believed it necessary to deal with the 'current situation' with a 'spirit of political responsibility and national realism'[2], or to put it bluntly, to drop some of the previously irrevocable preconditions. Indeed, the weaker position of the PLO leadership was the consequence of several global and regional developments that compromised its political strategy, its resources and its overall condition.

The first event that resulted in one of the most detrimental periods in the history of the PLO was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in summer 1990 and the subsequent US decision to attack Iraq to restore Kuwaiti independence in January 1991. PLO support for Iraq, mainly motivated by the widespread popularity that Saddam Hussein enjoyed among the Palestinian population, backfired painfully. As the second Gulf war ended with the debacle of the 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 for PLO support for Iraq.[3]

Secondly, on the international level, 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, finally letting emerge Washington as the only broker for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The new US global dominance was reflected in the organisation of the aforementioned peace conference that eventually took place 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 US, marking the advent of a new, 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 violent confrontations between

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[2] "20th Palestine National Council Meeting, Political Statement, Algiers, 28 September, 1991.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 2 (1991): 151–155.

[3] Philip Mattar, "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (1994): 32–34.

[4] William B. Quandt, *Peace Process. American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington D.C. - Los Angeles: Brookings Institution, University of California Press, 2005), 302–311.

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 institution 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 re-formulate its own political line in the wake of its failure to achieve significant advantages during the ascending phase of the First Intifada.

Uncertainty before the Watershed: The PFLP between the Intifada and Oslo.

If the PLO leadership had to cope with a crisis of unprecedented dimensions, this implied in turn that 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 unprecedented challenges, but 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 following the USSR's demise, the Popular Front saw in the rise of Iraq an alternative counterweight to US-Israeli and Arab 'reactionary' interests. That is why the PFLP leadership deemed possible linking

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[5] Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 636–637.

the end of Iraq's occupation of Kuwait to the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian forces from Lebanon and the end of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as Saddam Hussein himself demanded.[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, and correlated with PLO's overall straitened circumstances, Arafat's neopatrimonial management of funds apparently increased starting from 1991-92. 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 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 custodianship of the peace process and was afraid that the PLO leadership's pliability would pave the way to the fall of once central Palestinian demands such as an end to settlement activity or the inclusion of Jerusalem in discussions.[10] Despite these concerns, if the PFLP had been already unable to constrain the PLO leadership during the 19th PNC session, it appeared powerless at the 20th. Incapable of presenting an effective political opposition and hesitating on withdrawal from the PLO institutions, as Habash explained, the

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[6] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1035, December 23, 1990, 48-49.
[7] Interview with former PFLP-OPT cadre Issam Hijjawi, Edinburgh, November 5, 2015.
[8] Rex Brynen, "The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 1 (1995): 29.
[9] Interview with former PFLP Politburo Member Salah Salah, Beirut, May 28, 2015.
[10] "Dr. George Habash in a Press Conference Following the Conclusion of the Palestine National Council," *Al-Hadaf,* No. 1072, October 6, 1991, 9–10.

PFLP wanted to focus on building up 'grassroots unity', or to say with its slogan 'the unity of rocks and molotov', concentrating its efforts on the 'struggle side' rather than on the 'diplomatic side' of PLO activities.[11] The formulation of these goals implied that the Popular Front 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 the majority of the national movement and the external leadership did not have full control on its branches either. This was shown by the rise of armed groups whose main mission was targeting Israel's Palestinian collaborators. The 'Red Eagle Group', one of the most active among this kind of organisation, claimed affiliation with the PFLP but was not established following orders from the leadership. Local, young PFLP cadres, such as Ayman al-Rizza and ʿIlm al-Din Shahin, were behind the creation of the group and acted in total autonomy from the exiled leaders.[12] Although the Popular Front supported its actions against collaborator networks[13], 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.[14]

Despite the alleged priority of expanding popular mobilisation, 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.[15] 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 came to highlight the erroneous position of the

[11] Ibid., 10.
[12] "Ayman Muhsin Saʿid Al-Rizza" accessed May 18, 2017, https://goo.gl/TwKxh3; "ʿIlm al-Din Saʿid Yusuf Shahin", accessed May 18, 2017, https://goo.gl/L55q9V.
[13] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 975, 17 September, 1989, 10-12.
[14] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 636–637; Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 122–131.
[15] "Al-Dawra al-ʿAshira Dawra ʿAdiyya (The Tenth Regular Session)," *Wafa Info*, accessed May 5, 2016, http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=9311.

'executive leadership', namely its decision to join a peace plan aimed at implementing nothing less than the 1979 Camp David provisions for Palestine that did not include statehood but only 'self-administration'. However, on this occasion as well, 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 aim at threatening 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 indeed 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.[16]

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 Popular Front. The shift towards the PFLP was also encouraged by Yasser ʿAbd Rabbo's secession, along with other DFLP cadres, and his creation of a new faction, the Democratic Palestinian Union (Fidaʾ), closer to Fatah. In the light of this split, the DFLP leadership could not support the peace process openly and decided to side with the opposition at first[17]. Thus, while the PCP mounted the peace bandwagon, the PFLP and DFLP issued a joint statement along with the PLF and PPSF. The four factions called all Palestinian factions and 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.[18]

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

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[16] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1077, November 11, 1991, 5-9.
[17] Salim Tamari, "Left in Limbo: Leninist Heritage and Islamist Challenge ", *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 179 (1992): 20.
[18] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1113, August 23, 1992, 9.

affecting the Palestinian national movements emerged clearly during its Fifth National Congress.

The PFLP's Conservation Priorities at its Fifth National Congress.

The attention dedicated to this session of the PFLP's National Congress provides an insight into the core problems affecting the Popular Front in the first half of the 1990s. Moreover, the overview of the PFLP's shortcomings in addressing ideological and political change highlights the connection between factors fostering adherence to the PLO framework and those at the base of such failed renewal.

The Fifth National Congress of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, dedicated to the 'Martyrs of the Intifada,' was convened in Damascus, from 12-17 February, 1993. 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.[19] The PFLP, for its part, needed to redefine its basic theoretical, political and military orientations as well as to review its structure and leadership in order to stand up effectively to such threatening historical drivers. However, the PFLP also needed to overcome many obstacles in order to achieve genuine change such as the total absence of strategic planning over the last decade, the continued grip of first-generation cadres on the Politburo, and the ideological challenges stemming from the USSR's downfall and the rise of political Islam. Such obstacles were all intertwined and, in particular, the predominance of the founding group, and their political experience, was tightly connected with the lack of strategic thinking.

Paramount among the variety of factors determining the prevalence of tactic over strategy were the events that the PFLP leadership experienced during the Lebanese period and the years preceding the 1987 Intifada. After the relocation from Jordan to Lebanon in the early 1970s, and particularly since the outbreak

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[19] Lamis Andoni, "The PLO at the Crossroads," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 1 (1991): 54–55.

of civil war in 1975, one of the main PLO priorities was to preserve the political, economic and military authority that it had been able to establish within the country. The continually evolving scenario of the Lebanese conflict, marked by multiple interventions from external actors and shifting alliances among Lebanese and foreign forces, heavily influenced the decision-making process which often resulted in 'event-driven' policies aimed at the survival of the PLO quasi-state infrastructure in Lebanon.[20] Besides this, the Popular Front 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 engendered much more hostility within the Lebanese Right than Fatah's loosely-defined nationalism, increasing the Front's exposure to security threats.[21] The prioritisation of survival acquired even more importance for the PFLP after the eviction of the Palestinian armed organisations 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 difficulties stemming from relations with the new Syrian host.[22]

The Lebanese period is central to understanding 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 for PFLP internal structure and practice, determining a bureaucratisation of its membership and leadership. The creation of more structured institutions, and, most notably, the funds flowing to the PFLP through PLO channels encouraged the 'professionalisation' of political activism much to the detriment of revolutionary ethos.[23] Consequently, the preservation of bureaucratic structures, and the benefits stemming from them, became a concern that tacitly influenced the Popular Front's agency and represented an obstacle to change that would endanger established positions within the organisation.

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[20] Rex Brynen, "Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon," *Westview Press*, 1990, accessed 16-07-2016http://prrn.mcgill.ca/research/papers/brynen2_08.htm.

[21] Georges Corm, *Le Proche-Orient Éclaté: 1956-2010* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 444.

[22] See Chapter 1, 7-10.

[23] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 454–460.

Furthermore, the bureaucratic structure also represented an instrument available to the leadership in order to exert a stronger control on the faction's membership.[24]

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 consequence, the congress was ultimately unable to make a thorough review of the PFLP's trajectory and lay the foundation of a renewed party with a renewed strategy. In the light of this failure, the PFLP held even less adequate political means to confront the phase that opened after September 1993.

Undisputable Ideology.

The PFLP's undisputed adherence to Marxist-Leninism has been often described as the consequence of a dogmatic approach to political ideology.[25] However, as the observation of its conduct during previous phases evidenced, 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 of the leadership, particularly concerning the issue of party bureaucratisation.

The crisis of global Marxism following the demise of the Soviet Union sparked, within the Palestinian Left, different degrees of ideological reform. This ranged from the PCP's transformation into the Palestine People's Party (PPP) and its abandonment of Marxist-Leninism, to re-evaluation of 'democratic

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[24] Asʿad AbuKhalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 370–373.

[25] See introduction for the approaches of academic literature to the PFLP's adoption of Marxist-Leninism.

centralism' within the DFLP.[26] Conversely, the PFLP confirmed its main ideological cornerstones, proceeding with only a temperate 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'.[27] 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 to formulate a proper political response to them. 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'.[28] However, in 1993, the PFLP was probably at the furthest point from being the proletarian party it aimed at becoming in its earlier phases.[29] The leadership was still mainly composed of figures of bourgeois background such as Habash himself or ʿAbd 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 capable of 'mobilising the revolutionary classes'. The apparent 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 Popular Front believed that, given the contradiction between Palestinian national aspirations and the Zionist project, all sectors of the Palestinian society and political arena could be considered as driving forces of the revolution.[30] However, as the secret talks that led to the

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[26] Mahir Sharif, "From Marxism to Liberal Nationalism: A Transformation in Palestinian Marxism," in *Post-Marxism and the Middle East* ed. Faleh A. Jabar (London: Saqi Books, 1997), 74–77; Tamari, "Left in Limbo: Leninist Heritage and Islamist Challenge", 17.

[27] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Wathiqa al-Nazariyya: Afkar Awaliyya Hawl Azmat al-Marksiyya al-Lininiyya. (The Fifth National Congress. The Theoretical Document: First Ideas on the Crisis of Marxist-Leninism)," *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1144, March 23, 1993, 3-4.

[28] Ibid., 11–12.

[29] PFLP- Culture Central Department, *Al-Musira al-Tarikhiyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin. Qiraʾ wa ʿArd li-Wathaʾiq Muʾtamarat al-Jabha (The Historic Trajectory of the PFLP. Reading and Presentation of the Front's Conference Documents)* (Gaza, 2010), 90–94.

[30] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Barnamaj al-Siyasi. (The Fifth National Congress. The Political Program)," *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1146, May 9, 1993, 6–7.

194

Oslo Accords and the resulting establishment of new Palestinian institutions demonstrated, 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 who respectively were totally ignored by the agreements and whose conditions would deteriorate under the Oslo economic regime.[31]

Notwithstanding the crisis affecting international as well as Palestinian Marxists, the PFLP saw in the degeneration of the Soviet model the main reason behind the current situation 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 Secretary-General 'became the sole source of authority sanctioning the correct line'. Palestinian and Arab Marxists' mistake was that of 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 the 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.[32]

This survey of the PFLP's handling of ideological renewal evidences the sharp contradictions between its discourse and practice, which support the view of adherence to Marxism as an instrument of factional control. This approach

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[31] Sara Roy, "De-Development Revisited: Palestinian Economy and Society Since Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 68–69.

[32] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Wathiqa al-Nazariyya: Afkar Awaliyya Hawl Azmat Al-Marksiyya Al-Lininiyya. (The Fifth National Congress. The Theoretical Document: First Ideas on the Crisis of Marxist-Leninism)," 5–6.

will be further cleared in the next section which addresses the preservation of organisational principles and the lack of programmatic planning.

The Persistence of Organisational and Programmatic Shortcomings.

The Congress documents on organisational structure and the program 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.

These calls were echoed in the organisational report of the congress which emphasised the concept of 'transformation' to adapt the Front to the current political circumstances. Again, 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. Indeed, despite a renewed stress on the implementation of 'collective leadership' at all levels, the concept of 'democratic centralism' was restated various times.[33] The reaffirmation of this concept contrasted with calls for renewal and 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 was able to impose the line, without consideration or toleration of internal divergences.[34] This not only contributed to the splits that occurred in the PFLP's early years, but also prevented the emergence of a new leadership from the experience of the Intifada in the OPT, as was outlined in the previous chapter. As evidence of this, 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

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[33] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Taqrir al-Tanzimi: Al-Tahawwul wa al-Maham al-Barnamajiyya al-ʿAma. (The Fifth National Congress. The Organization Report: Tranformation and the General Programmatic Tasks)," *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1152, June 24, 1993, 2, 8.

[34] AbuKhalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," 363–369.

'inside'.[35] 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 program issued by the congress highlighted again the shallowness of the PFLP's policy review process. The main tasks identified in 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 prioritising resistance activities in the OPT as the main stage of the conflict. All the points listed ultimately referred to the overall, 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.[36] 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 on the PFLP's program.

Besides the leadership's problems, such superficiality in the PFLP's planning effort was strictly related to the shortcomings that the PFLP's analysis presented concerning its relations with the PLO leadership. 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 in the unprecedented concentration of power into Arafat's hands one of the main reasons behind PLO acceptance of the peace process opened in Madrid. Nonetheless, the PFLP's analysis failed to reach the core issue lying at the basis of Arafat's unreserved embrace of the Madrid process. This orientation was due the PLO leadership's urgency to strike a deal that would allow its definitive transformation into a governing entity, salvaging it from the nearly fatal decline of the post-Gulf War phase.[37] Apparently ignoring this shift, the

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[35] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State : The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, 649.

[36] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Barnamaj al-Siyasi. (The Fifth National Congress. The Political Program)," 4–6.

[37] Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 55–56.

PFLP conceived its relationship with the 'bourgeois, executive leadership' as regulated by the principle of a dialectic '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.[38] In the light of this analytical misconception, the PFLP could also ascribe the causes of the main PLO ills, such as the bureaucratisation of its personnel, to the misbehaviour of a personalised elite rather than to long-standing problems that concerned directly the PFLP as well. 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' of the liberation movement that had been holding continuously the reins of power and that negatively influenced broad sectors of the national movement beyond the leading circle.[39] In other words, in its official analysis, 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 if 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[40]. Therefore, the dependence of the PFLP's structure on PLO funds undermined formulation of and support for policies that questioned the framework which ensured 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 new Islamist organisations, despite their refusal to join the PLO. 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

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[38] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Barnamaj al-Siyasi. (The Fifth National Congress. The Political Program)," 7–8.

[39] "Al-Muʿtamar al-Watani al-Khamis. Al-Taqrir al-Siyasi. (The Fifth National Congress. The Political Report)," *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1150, June 13, 1993, 30–32.

[40] Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State. The Palestinian National Movement 1949-1993*, 454, 648.

main contradiction with Israel'.[41] 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 questions about the viability of 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.[42]

To conclude, this analysis of the 1993 PFLP's Fifth National Congress outlines three, interrelated problems. First, the Popular Front 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 itself and the mechanical adoption and 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 at the same time as its engagement as well as dependence on the PLO establishment. Finally, these two features emerging from the result of the 1993 congress appeared connected with 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

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[41] Ibid., 32.
[42] Ibid., 33.

the preservation of the status quo within the PFLP, thus with the preservation of control in the hands of the exiled leadership.

The Oslo Accords.

The PLO-Israel peace accord, and the way it was negotiated, not only attracted PFLP rejection but apparently provoked a break with the PLO framework. Nonetheless, the PFLP's concern for integration resurfaced in the formulation of its oppositional narrative which was eventually reframed as a fight for the PLO institutions.

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'.[43] 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 an end to Israeli settlement activity were seen as a suppression of the Palestinian people's rights. More than this, the accords represented the abandonment of what the PLO had achieved until then, particularly in terms of production 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 fundamental to advancing the Palestinian case on core aspects of the conflict such as the modalities and timing of Israel's withdrawal from the OPT.[44]

Inevitably, the PFLP joined the variegated group of opponents of the Oslo Accords. In the words of George Habash, 'Arafat signed the act of humiliation

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[43] Edward Said, "The Morning After," *London Review of Books*, 1993, accessed May 23, 2016, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v15/n20/edward-said/the-morning-after.
[44] "Special Document File: The Peace Process," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 1 (1993): 116–121; Sara Roy, "Why Peace Failed: An Oslo Autopsy," *Current History* 100, no. 651 (2002): 8–9.

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'.[45] 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 program and denial of its National Charter.[46] 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 legitimisation deriving from this different understanding of the PLO's essence as an institution. While the PFLP still adhered to 'revolutionary' sources of legitimacy, Arafat and his circle sought to legitimise their line by virtue of the international recognition that the Oslo accords received.[47] Furthermore, 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.[48] 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. Moreover, the DoP represented a *fait accompli* that the PLO leadership presented to its leftist as well as its emerging Islamist opposition. Consequently, the Popular Front was not only deprived of any meaningful role within the PLO, but was '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

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[45] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1162, September 19, 1993, 10.
[46] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Statement issued by the PFLP's Central Committee)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1165, October 10, 1993, 8-9.
[47] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, 45.
[48] See chapter 1, 17-23.

interests through the direct linkage with the imperialist and the Zionist plans'.[49]
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 Popular Front rejected an alleged
request from Arafat to join his institution-building efforts, though from a
position of internal opposition, underscoring the Popular Front's unwillingness
to further endanger the PLO. This would have meant helping the PLO Chairman
confer additional credibility on his upcoming PNA. Nevertheless, Arafat 'broke
all the bridges and destroyed all common denominators' and this made
'impossible any encounter between his path and that of the PFLP'.[50] From this
position stemmed the PFLP's call for the formation of a 'wider national front,
for a wider representation'. In other words, the Popular Front 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.[51]

However, the task did not come without its 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.[52]
Finally, the PFLP also renewed its commitment to strengthen its grassroots
activities and returned to stress, at least verbally, the central role of armed
struggle, this time in the OPT, as a mean to prevent Arafat from settling his 'self-
administering entity'.[53] While focusing on grassroots mobilisation was an urgent
necessity for a faction that was experiencing institutional marginalisation, this

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[49] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Statement issued by the PFLP's Central Committee)", 8.
[50] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1165, October 10, 1993, 10-12.
[51] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1162, September 10, 1993, 12.
[52] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1165, 12-13.
[53] Bayan Siyasi bi-Munasaba al-Dhikra al-Sadisa wa al-ʿIshrin li-Intilaqat al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Political Statement on occasion of the PFLP's 26th anniversary), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1173, December 26, 1993.

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.

Return to Coalition Politics.

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, a year before the signing of the DoP, 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 delegitimization 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'.[54] 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 a mixed 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.[55] Nonetheless, a certain margin of action for the Unified Leadership seemed to emerge.

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[54] "Al-Iʿlan ʿan Tashkil Hayʾa Qiyadiyya Muwahhada li-l-Jabhatayn al-Shaʿbiyya wa al-Dimuqratiyya (The Announcement of the Formation of a Unified Commanding Body for the Popular and Democratic Fronts), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1118, September 27, 1992, 6.
[55] "Chronology: 16 August-15 November 1992," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 2 (1993): 174.

With the signing of the Oslo accords, the necessity of maintaining more consistent coordination became urgent. As mentioned earlier, the new association initiative raised scepticism across the national movement since it was seen as an automatic reply of the leftist opposition, empty of any actual consequence. Therefore, the PFLP needed to boost the credibility of the Unified Leadership and point out the qualitative difference between this new attempt at association with the Democratic Front and the past failed experiences. In a display of self-awareness, George 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 program and the actual agency of the leftist forces. Furthermore, he also noted that the leftist factions should promote a new 'national unity' on the basis of 'grassroots support and not of high-level contacts among the top cadres'. This entailed pursuing a political practice prioritising a social program 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 joint goal of impeding the implementation of the accords.[56] Talking about the 'objective and subjective' reasons behind the need for unity of the Left, 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.[57] In the light of this self-criticism, the Popular Front appeared to push

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[56] "Al-ʿAdad al-Sanawi (The Annual Number), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1174, January 1994, 6-14.
[57] *Ibid.*, 15-17.

into the background the factionalism and contrast between the DFLP's 'moderation' and the PFLP's intransigence towards Fatah, two factors that contributed to previous failures.

The PFLP's analysis was nonetheless limited and 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 highlighted correctly some major problems, especially in underlining the Left's inability to make clear its distance from the PLO Right. However, 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 'outside' 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.[58] 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 Institutional Limits 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.

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[58] *Ibid.*, 18-22.

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.[59] Therefore, the main rationale pushing the Popular Front 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 Popular Front 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.[60]

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 program. The formulation of the program itself and the rules supposed to coordinate relations within the Alliance were telling of the

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[59] Anders Strinberg, "The Damascus-Based Alliance of Palestinian Forces: A Primer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 60
[60] Interview with Marwan ʿAbd al-ʿAl, PFLP official in Lebanon, Beirut, May 27, 2015.

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.[61] 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'.[62] 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.[63] 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.[64] 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

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[61] "Tahaluf al-Quwwa al-Filastiniyya Yusaddir Bayanan Hawla al-Maham al-Siyasiyya (The Alliance of Palestinian Forces Issues a Statement about the Political Tasks)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1175, January 23, 1994, 13.
[62] Ibid.
[63] *Al Hadaf,* no. 1175, January 23, 1994, 8-9.
[64] Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 153–154.

military action, non-violent protest and political collaboration at a grassroots level.[65]

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 a mixed response in terms of support and opposition from public opinion in the OPT, this was not the case for the Gaza-Jericho agreement signed in Cairo in February 1994.[66] 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 control of borders 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.[67] 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 dead 29 Palestinian worshippers 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 settler movement, exemplified by the curfew imposed on the Palestinian residents of Hebron to protect the 450 settlers living in the old town, questioned the meaning

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[65] Khaled Hroub, *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), 119–125.
[66] Jerusalem Media and Comunication Centre, "Public Opinion Poll No. 4 On Palestinian Attitudes to the PLO-Israeli Agreement," 1994, accessed May 23, 2016, http://www.jmcc.org/documentsandmaps.aspx?id=509.
[67] Graham Usher, *Palestine in Crisis. The Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo* (London-East Haven, CT: Transnational Institute (TNI) and Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), 1995), 18–20; Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, 101–102.

of a peace process that was not ending Israel's repressive measures.[68] 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'.[69]

In the light of these events, the Popular and Democratic Fronts once more demanded Arafat's resignation and called for 'democratic elections to select a new, legitimate leadership'.[70] Afterwards, in a bid to bolster their challenge to the Fatah leadership of the PLO, the PFLP and DFLP drafted a 'National Salvation Program', displaying their determination to pursue the unification process. The two factions intended this program 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 program, 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 the organisation of 'conferences' both inside and outside Palestine to coordinate opposition activities.[71] 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 program appeared as a more structured call for opposition unity, but did not solve the organisational problems and political differences that afflicted the APF.

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[68] Usher, *Palestine in Crisis. The Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo*, 20–21; Peter Shaw-smith, "The Israeli Settler Movement Post-Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 3 (1994): 108–109.
[69] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Qiyada al-Markaziyya al-Muwahhad li-l-Jabhatayn al-Shaʿbiyya wa al-Dimuqratiyya (Statement Issued by the Central Unified Leadership of the Popular and Democratic Fronts)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1182, March 27, 1994, 15.
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] "Barnamaj al-Khilas al-Watani (National Salvation Program), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1195, July 17, 1994, 19-25.

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.[72] Conversely, the situation within the APF did not improve at all after the issuing of the program and the PFLP's leaders publicly voiced their disappointment, acknowledging 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'. Furthermore, he added that the APF 'quickly demonstrated its inability to become an effective coalition capable of mobilising the opposition (…) due to specific internal reasons'.[73] 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'.[74] The condition of the APF did not improve during the following year and by mid-1995, the failure of this coalition was recognised officially by PFLP leaders. According to Malluh, the opposition did not grasp the 'common denominators' between the Islamist and nationalist dimensions 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 that shared a common ideological background seemed viable.[75] However, this was not entirely true as the Popular Front 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

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[72] "Al-Maktaban al-Siyasiyan li-l-Jabhatayn al-Shaʿbiyya wa al-Dimuqratiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (The Politburos of the Popular and Democratic Fronts for the Liberation of Palestine), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1207, December 18, 1994, 30.

[73] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1198, August 14, 1994, 13; *Al-Hadaf,* no 1199, 21 August, 1994 12.

[74] Graham Usher, Marwan Barghouti, and Ghazi Abu Jiab, "Arafat and the Opposition," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 191 (1994): 25.

[75] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1220, July 23, 1995, 12-13.

actually seen as a suitable partner for dialogue needed to 'expose and overcome' the contradictions existing between the 'democratic and Islamist currents'.[76] In the PFLP's view, Islamic Jihad started to distinguish itself from Hamas by prioritising 'core nationalist, Palestinian values' over the Islamist social agenda.[77] 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 fostered the scepticism of leftist factions.[78]

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 and analysis of the Oslo accords but did not agree on their understanding of the PLO and traditional Palestinian institutions.[79] 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

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[76] "Al-ʿAdad al-Sanawi (The Annual Number), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1208, January 1995, 16-18; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1223, September 3, 1995, 18-21.

[77] Interview with former PFLP's Politburo member Salah Salah, Beirut, May 28, 2015.

[78] Wissam Alhaj, Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, and Eugénie Rebillard, *De La Théologie À La Liberation? Histoire Du Jihad Islamique Palestinien* (Paris: La Découvert, 2014), 23–26; 138–140.

[79] On Hamas' position towards the Oslo Accords see for instance: Hamas, "Bayan Raqm 103 (Statement No. 103)", October 1993, accessed on May 19, 2017, http://hamas.ps/ar/post/245/; On Hamas view of the PLO: "Mithaq Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement)", *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 13, no. 4 (1993), 146.

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 little more than 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. Therefore, the exploration of the PFLP and DFLP's policies between late 1995 and early 1997 outlines not only the influence of short-term results on the experience of the Unified Leadership and its factions' political readjustment. It also helps to clarify the patterns governing the PFLP and DFLP's action 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 institutions envisaged by the Oslo peace process and thus strike a severe blow to the PNA and to Arafat's agenda.[80] 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 a 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. Indeed, the high election turnout (71,6% of total

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[80] "Al-Hadaf al-Sanawi (Annual Al-Hadaf)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1231, January 14, 1996, 8-9.

registered voters)[81] not only gave further legitimacy to Yasser Arafat but also jeopardised the already precarious credibility of the Unified Leadership's political line.[82] 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 cancellation of 'those articles of the Palestinian Covenant which [denied] Israel's right to exist'.[83] 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'.[84]

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 to realise a proper merger of the two Fronts. Shortly after the conclusion of the PNC, the Popular Front 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.[85]

In June, signalling its willingness to engage with 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 in an attempt to capitalise on concern raised by the arrival in power of a new Likud-led government in Israel, the Popular Front hoped to garner support around its initiative among the different trends of Oslo critics. That is why the call for dialogue focused on the main points of the nationalist agenda for the

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[81] Central Electoral Commision-Palestine, "The 1996 Presidential and Legislative Elections," accessed July 18, 2016, accessed July 18, 2016,https://www.elections.ps/Portals/0/pdf/Resultselection1996.pdf.
[82] Ali Jarbawi, "Palestinian Politics at a Crossroads," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 4 (1996): 36–38.
[83] Mahdi Abdul Hadi, ed., "Declaration of Principle - Cairo Agreement," in *Documents on Palestine, Volume II* (Jerusalem: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, 1997), 143, 205.
[84] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1234, May 10, 1996, 16-17.
[85] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Political Statement issued by the PFLP)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1242, July 14, 4-5.

OPT, such as the protection of Jerusalem, the fight against the settlements and the protection of democracy within the new institutions and OPT society at large. 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 Popular Front's Central Committee issued and subscribed to it. [86] As a year earlier, in March 1997, the PFLP took part in 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'.[87] 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 pole 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 it lost its fundamental political significance. In addition, factional distrust cannot be neglected as at this stage, it 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 the Democratic Front inasmuch as the

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[86] "Nass al-Mubadara al-Siyasiyya al-Muqaddama min J. S. T. F. li-Tartib al-Bayt al-Filastini (Text of the Political Initiative presented by the PFLP to Reorganize the Palestinian House), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1244, August 11. 1996, 10-11.
[87] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1325, March 9, 1997, 18-19.

Popular Front considered itself the leading faction 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.[88]

With the breakup of the PFLP-DFLP Unified Leadership, the two factions pursued dialogue with Fatah and the PNA on an individual basis 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 the two Front 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.[89] 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 fairly 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 an overwhelmingly divisive point between the PFLP and DFLP at this stage.

Between Rejection and Acceptance.

Throughout its membership of the PLO, the Popular Front's position towards the 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 Popular Front followed a pattern that kept occurring several times. Rejection was first followed by the attempt to form a counterweight to Fatah's dominating position in the PLO by trying to establish a coalition with other factions. The coalition then appears increasingly unable to meet its own goals, allowing some

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[88] Jamil Hilal, *Al-Yasar Al-Filastini. Ila ʾayna? (The Palestinian Left. Where To?)* (Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2009), 94–95; Interview with former PFLP-OPT cadre Issam Hijjawi, Edinburgh, November 5, 2015.

[89] Abu Ali Mustafa and Nayif Hawatimah, "The Palestinian Secular Opposition at a Crossroads," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 79, 82.

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, and the factions composing it do not coordinate effectively within PLO bodies due to diverging interests and mutual distrust. 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, as the present study aims at demonstrating, was directly linked to the opposition-integration dilemma experienced by the Popular Front.

The gradual shift from rejection to acceptance occurred, for instance, with the 1974 Ten Points Program, the approval of which at the 12th PNC 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.[90] 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 Popular

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[90] Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 149–152.

Front 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 nonetheless 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.

A Gradual Shift: Seeking Integration, Preserving 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 Popular Front thus started to intervene in the Oslo-driven state-building process and on the reorganisation of institutions in the OPT. In these initial phases of its acceptance of post-Oslo politics, the PFLP responded 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 in the second half of 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 Popular Front did not play a relevant role in the process, a first shift in its rhetoric occurred, showing how the PFLP 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.[91]

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[91] Usher, Barghouti, and Abu Jiab, "Arafat and the Opposition," 24.

Throughout 1995, the Popular Front did not relinquish its condemnation of the 'surrender path' undertaken by the PLO leadership, continually denouncing the overall underpinnings of the Oslo process as well as expressing its rejection of the new agreements signed by the PLO and Israel.[92] 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 over the Territories.[93] Nonetheless, the PFLP demonstrated its interest in engaging in 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 publication of the draft law on political parties issued by the PNA.[94] 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 fact that the law had been drafted directly by the PNA Presidency 'in absence of a legislative authority', and called all critics, including Oslo supporters such as the PPP and Fidaʾ, to demand that the President transfer his authority on the matter to the Committee for Parties Licensing. The issues of democracy and plurality resurfaced again, as the document pointed to the authoritarian trends of the self-administration government that retained a veto power on which parties could be admitted into the political game. 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'. [95]

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[92] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1217, June 11, 1994, 15-16; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1225, October 1, 1995, 8-9.
[93] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, 110–114.
[94] As part of its state-building process, the PNA Presidency, namely Arafat, issued a draft law aimed at regulating the existence and activities of Palestinian political parties in the PNA system. Particular criticisms were drawn by an article of the draft law prohibiting the affiliation of armed branches to political parties.
[95] *"Hawla Mashruʿ Qanun al-Ahzab al-Siyasiyya al-Sadir ʿan Sulta al-Hukm al-ʾIdari al-Dhati (On the Draft Law on Political Parties issued by the Self-Administration Government)", Al-Hadaf,* no. 1227, October 29, 1995, 16-17.

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, delegitimization of the Oslo process and of Arafat's authority was still the main goal of the PFLP leadership. In light of this, the Popular Front's leaders could not agree to 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'.[96] In the PFLP's view, the whole process simply entailed providing a 'nationalist cover' to yet another of 'Israel's victories'. Furthermore, the Popular Front contested the democratic bases of the electoral process.[97] The electoral law had been imposed by the PNA's Executive 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 providing services 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.[98]

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

[96] Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian Elections: An Assessment," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 17.
[97] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1229, November 26, 1995, 10-14.
[98] Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution*, 195–197; Lamis Andoni, "The Palestinian Elections: Moving toward Democracy or One-Party Rule?," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 15.

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 implementation of its 'quasi-state' functions. Conversely, the presence of the Occupation 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 was to conflict with the hierarchical structure of the PLO executive bodies.[99]

Indeed, the inside-outside divide was more manifest within Fatah, particularly because Arafat relied on formerly Tunis-based cadres to set up the PNA institutions following the Gaza-Jericho agreement. Afterwards, a fully-fledged 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 in so doing Arafat's full backing.[100] Although inside-outside competition was not so open within the Popular Front, given the leadership's initial refusal to return to the OPT, the exiled leaders of the organisation 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.[101] Furthermore, as was made clear earlier, 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 as soon as the facts disavowed the line that the 'outside' had imposed concerning the 1996 election. In the aftermath of the vote, the PFLP leadership

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[99] Jamil Hilal, "PLO Institutions : The Challenge Ahead," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 1 (1993): 49–54.

[100] Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution*, 197.

[101] Parson, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa,* 111.

started working to move its veteran leaders into the OPT, exploiting the new PNC's sessions as the first opportunity to fulfil this task.

In relation to the elections, the strife within the PFLP was due to local cadres' fear that the boycott would further marginalise the PFLP. Such concern led some leaders in the OPT to urge the Politburo in Damascus to accept the new institutions as a matter of fact 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 lied behind the elections.[102] 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 ʿAbd al-Shafi, the widely-respected former director of the Red Crescent Society, at its head.[103] 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 an overwhelming majority of its supporters went to the polls to cast their ballot and some of its local cadres gained seats as independents.[104] This demonstrated that the PLO leftist opposition did not hold total control over its membership in the OPT. In fact, the erosion of the Left's entrenchment in the Territories during the first half of the 1990s was linked to the lack of democracy within the leftist factions. 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.[105]

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[102] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1229, 14.
[103] Andoni, "The Palestinian Elections: Moving toward Democracy or One-Party Rule?", 8.
[104] Shikaki, "The Palestinian Elections: An Assessment.", 18-20.
[105] Rema Hammami, "Palestinian NGOs since Oslo: From NGOs Politics to Social Movements?," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 214 (2000): 17.

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 Popular Front's leadership had 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 framework of the APF.[106] Indeed, after refusing to provide a 'nationalist cover' to the PLO leadership and Israel plans, the Popular Front allowed its members to attend a PNC session supposed to deliver what the Israeli side required during bilateral negotiations, namely the treatment of such a highly sensitive issue as amendment of the Palestinian National Charter. Thus, Malluh's intervention during the Council to condemn 'any modification of the Charter' did not appear credible, underscoring the PFLP's predicament.[107]

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: The Final Shift towards Integration.

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 of the post-Oslo regime to its acceptance. 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 according to the post-Oslo coordinates.

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[106] Anders Strindberg, "The Damscus Based Alliance of Palestinian Forces: A Primer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 64.
[107] "Kalimat al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin fi-l-Majlis al-Watani (The PFLP's intervention during the PNC)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1237, April 28, 1996, 12-13.

Finally, the Popular Front 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 right-wing 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.[108]

In order to support politically the initiative, PFLP leaders such as Taysir Qubʿa stressed the 'historical commitment' of the Popular Front 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.[109] The shift in PFLP discourse emerged clearly in a Central Committee statement issued in December 1996 in which the Popular Front prioritised the need for a 'field unity to confront the [Israeli] policies of settlement, judaisation and siege'.[110] In addition to this, according to some reports, during this Central Council session the PFLP 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.[111]

The dialogue continued at difference paces throughout 1997 but nonetheless it started to have its first major effects. After ʿAbd al-Rahim Malluh's return, the PFLP started considering the relocation of other high profile cadres to the OPT.

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[108] "Nass al-Mubadara al-Siyasiyya al-Muqaddama min J. S. T. F. li-Tartib al-Bayt al-Filastini (Text of the Political Initiative presented by the PFLP to Reorganize the Palestinian House)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1244, August 11, 1996, 10-11.
[109] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1252, December 8, 1996, 10-11.
[110] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Lajna Al-Markaziyya li-l-Jabha al- Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Statement issued by the PFLP's Central Committee), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1253, December 22, 1996, 4-5.
[111] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, 127–128.

According to the declaration released by Abu Ali Mustafa in the wake of his return to the OPT in September 1999, the Popular Front had already decided in 1996 to dispatch its Deputy Secretary-General to the territories but a last-minute Israeli refusal delayed Mustafa's instalment 'inside' Palestine.[112] 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 Popular Front intended to settle all differences within the Palestinian camp democratically, renewing the PFLP's availability to discuss all aspects concerning the crisis of intra-Palestinian relations.[113]

The Popular Front once again resorted extensively to its traditional Maoist concept of 'changing contradictions' to justify its shifting line and even hard-liners, notably Abu Ali Mustafa, consistently adhered to the new narrative.[114] 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 was displeased by the final PFLP choice to remain within the traditional framework of the Palestinian national movement. In a phase at which 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.[115] In addition to 'primary and secondary contradictions', the Popular Front ideologues tried to justify their faction's stance by also invoking the place that the PLO, as utmost national framework and achievement, had always occupied in the PFLP's view of the Palestinian national movement. By claiming its commitment to 'reform and rebuilding' of the PLO, the Popular Front artificially separated it from the

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[112] "Tasrih Sahafi Sadir ʿan al-Rafiq Abu Ali Mustafa (Press Declaration issued by Comrade Abu Ali Mustafa)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1298, October 10, 1999, 16.
[113] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1254, January 19, 1997, 9-15.
[114] "Al-Rafiq Abu Ali Mustafa fi Hadith Shamil maʿa al-Hadaf (Comrade Abu Ali Mustafa in a comprehensive conversation with Al-Hadaf)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1266, August 17, 1997, 8-15.
[115] Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrel, *Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 71–74.

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.[116] Such positions underscored both the PFLP's fluctuating line as well as its inability to propose an alternative, notwithstanding that the frameworks of the APF and, more significantly, the Unified Leadership still existed. As had already emerged clearly, and would again surface in future phases, the dependence of the PFLP's bureaucratic apparatus on the PLO represented an insurmountable barrier to its political agency.

The PFLP's willingness, therefore, to pursue dialogue with Fatah and the PNA ultimately reflected its weaker position. The Popular Front wanted to reorganise its network in the Territories 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.[117] 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 talks officially focused on a review process of intra-Palestinian relations and supposedly of the whole trajectory of the Palestinian question since the signing of the Oslo accords. This entailed finding some common ground concerning adherence to the 'PLO nationalist program', activities to confront Israel's policies, and the necessary 'steps towards the statehood declaration'. The PFLP, for its part, put particular stress on the reform of PLO institutions, from trade unions in the OPT to the 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.[118] However, given the

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[116] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1257, March 9, 1997, 10-12.
[117] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1267, August 31, 1997, 3.
[118] "Al-Hadaf Tanshur Awraq al-ʿAmal al-Muqaddama li-Ijtimaʿ Amman Bain Wafday al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya wa Harakat Fath (Al-Hadaf Publishes the Working Document presented to the Amman

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.[119] 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.[120]

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, were its content to satisfy requirements concerning Palestinian sovereignty and right of return for Palestinian refugees.[121] The PFLP continued to affirm its rejection of the PNA as a direct emanation of the Oslo agreement, but the *de facto* settlement it found 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

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Meeting between the delegations of the PFLP and Fatah)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1298, October 10, 1999, 20-27.

[119] "Bayan Jamahiri Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Public Statement issued by the PFLP's Politburo)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1298, October 10, 1999, 16.

[120] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1298, October 10, 1999, 13.

[121] Mustafa and Hawatimah, "The Palestinian Secular Opposition at a Crossroads," 79, 81.

policy fluctuation occurred with even more clarity as the new uprising unleashed a further reconfiguration of Palestinian political balances.

Conclusions.

The study of the PFLP's conduct throughout the 1990s evidences two levels of fluctuation. First, a macro-level, consisting of the shift from total rejection of the Oslo accords to *de facto* acceptance of the political scenario shaped by the peace process. Secondly, a micro-level that affected the PFLP's approach towards relations with other Palestinian factions and its base in the OPT.

The opposition-integration dilemma continued to represent a major cause of PFLP policy fluctuation. Outstanding events, such as the 1991 US attack on Iraq and the collapse of the USSR, had a negative fallout, emphasising the PFLP's dilemma. The economic crisis and the demise of a paramount political model that these two events sparked strengthened the PFLP's need to maintain integration in the PLO notwithstanding the 1993 Oslo accords. Such an issue determined the PFLP's focus on institutional politics in its attempt to confront the accords themselves.

The PFLP's predicament already appeared clear during its 1993 Fifth National Congress. The absence of ideological renewal, the minor relevance of organisational reshuffling, and the lack of a program for the new phase reflected such conditions. The failure to achieve genuine renewal stemmed from the lack of strategic planning which was in turn linked to the dependence of the PFLP leadership on the PLO framework as well as to the bureaucratisation of the PFLP's structure. This forged an overall conservative approach that served the PFLP leadership goal of maintaining control over the organisation.

The signing of the Oslo accords brought the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma to an unprecedented level. While Arafat committed the PLO to a conflict settlement that the Front historically opposed, the PFLP was unable, and unwilling, to emancipate itself from it, consequently working for an unlikely change of balance within the PLO. The formation of the PFLP-DFLP Unified Leadership represented an attempt to delegitimise the PLO Chairman's line within national institutions. To this end, the Unified Leadership's attempted

association with the Islamist opposition within the framework of the APF developed. 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. Indeed, several local PFLP leaders increasingly called for opposition to Arafat from within the PNA. However, the prioritisation of PNA politics over the PLO might have entailed a rise of PFLP leaders already in the OPT to the detriment of the exiled leadership.

Ultimately, the line of PLO institutional opposition proved both ineffective and counterproductive. The PFLP's position towards the 1996 Palestinian general elections was a case in point. The wide turnout evidenced the PFLP leadership's alienation from OPT politics as well as the gap with its base, while the boycott ended up strengthening the legitimacy of the post-Oslo political regime. On the OPT ground, the PFLP's lack of action appeared all the more ill-fated as the PNA asserted its presence while Islamist factions, especially Hamas, continued to enlarge their grassroots presence. The subsequent PFLP leadership decision to return to Palestine under the terms of the Oslo accords not only marked the utter failure of its strategy and its will to maintain authority over the local organisation, but also underscored the final step of fluctuation on the macro-level.

The PFLP's adherence to the PLO framework also embodied the cause behind the unviability of associations with the Islamist factions. Beyond ideological differences, such a stance clashed with the Islamists' refusal to recognise the primacy of the PLO. As this point prevented effective coordination, the PFLP shifted back towards dialogue with Fatah. However, in the light of the Oslo accords, the PFLP's 'loyal opposition' fostered the perceived absence of any differences within the PLO as well as the lack of credibility of the PFLP's opposition.

The prevalence of 'institution politics' and the persistence of factional calculations lay also behind the failure of the Unified Leadership. On the one hand, the ineffective policies of 'institutional' delegitimization undermined the credibility of the Unified Leadership's opposition. On the other, the two Fronts'

leadership reluctance to share control over their factions represented a further obstacle to the realisation of genuine unity. This, in turn, led both factions to seek a separate settlement with the PNA once the possibility of stopping its rise vanished. Such an orientation represented remarkable inconsistency, as effective coordination would have brought more political weight within the PNA.

At the end of the decade, the PFLP had to confront a well-established Islamist opposition which increasingly delegitimised the Left's oppositional role within the PLO, especially as the PNA *de facto* overrode it. At the same time, the PFLP's unclear acceptance of the PNA paved the way towards a complication of its integration in the overlapping Palestinian institutions.

Chapter 5 - The Al-Aqsa Intifada and after: The PFLP's Contradictions in the New Millennium.

Introduction.

The failure to delegitimise the Oslo peace process and the institutions it established led the PFLP to deal with the PNA and the post-Oslo political regime as an enduring reality. Therefore, starting from the second half of the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, the PFLP sought integration into this political regime, while trying to reformulate the bases for its opposition to the PLO and PNA leadership. Consequently, the tensions stemming from the opposition-integration dilemma appeared strengthened, rendering the policy fluctuation pattern more evident. As was the case in previous phases, the wider opposition-integration dilemma combined with specific sources of tension emerged in this period. The conditions of post-Oslo politics, the specific dynamics of the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the exacerbation of the Hamas-Fatah competition combined with the overall contradiction affecting the PFLP's agency. In this context, its marginalisation appeared solidified, leaving the Popular Front close to total irrelevance.

In the late 1990s and until the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, the PFLP focused its narrative on the need to democratise the OPT political arena and the PNA's institutions. On an official level, the PFLP called for reactivation of the PLO to oversee the functioning of the PNA as well as for stronger national unity in the fight against the PNA's corruption and autocratic practices. On an informal level, activists from the PFLP and other leftist forces committed their efforts to fostering civil society politics as a barrier to the PNA's power. This occurred mainly within the framework of the fast-developing NGO sector. However, the *de facto* supremacy of the PNA, and within it of Fatah leadership, over the PLO, raised serious doubts over the viability of the PFLP's line. Moreover, as the PLO increasingly played a mere nominal role in granting formal recognition to the PNA, the PFLP's participation in its institutions contributed to strengthening the legitimacy of the PNA without an actual chance to influence its policies. The leftist activists' commitment in an NGO sector fully

dependent on the economic and political Oslo regime accentuated the lack of practical implications of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's opposition.

The beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada implied the possibility of a rearrangement of the Palestinian political arena. The wide popular rejection of the peace process could bring about a consensus-based rapprochement among the Palestinian factions, a prospect that would ensure more leverage to small factions such as the PFLP. Nevertheless, the development of the uprising, in particular its militarisation, the fragmentation of the Palestinian camp, and the Hamas-Fatah/PNA polarisation, emphasised the PFLP's oscillation between resistance and political settlement. On the military level, the PFLP alternated joint operations alongside other forces with actions dictated by intra-factional competition and the need to retaliate against Israel. On the political level, the PFLP pushed for a new consensus within the Palestinian national movement through a series of 'national initiatives' intended to foster intra-factional dialogue. However, Hamas and Fatah/PNA priorities, respectively the continuation of the Intifada and the enforcement of a unilateral Palestinian ceasefire, appeared irreconcilable. Consequently, the PFLP's efforts to mediate evidenced its fluctuation between a 'resistant' and a 'pragmatic' discourse, resulting in a token attempt to carve a role in the polarising Palestinian arena. These developments, alongside the harsh repression that the PFLP experienced at the hands of both Israel and the PNA Security Forces, turned the Al-Aqsa Intifada from a possible opportunity into a further step towards marginalisation.

After Arafat's death in November 2004 and the end of the uprising in February 2005, the PFLP continued to aim at integration within a Palestinian polity in transition. This led to full acceptance of the post-Oslo institutions and the PFLP's participation in both the 2005 presidential and the 2006 legislative ballots. Nonetheless the Hamas-Fatah/PNA polarisation and power conflict further highlighted the PFLP's shifting positions. Ultimately, the PFLP's political and economic dependence from the PLO/PNA framework was at the base of its shift from support of Hamas to alignment with Fatah during the 2006-2007 conflict. In sum, as the following chapter will show, the enduring PFLP inability to disengage from the traditional Palestinian political framework

perpetuated its policy fluctuation as the Front struggled to retain its oppositional role.

The Need for New Bases for the PFLP's Opposition Line.

One of the main symptoms of the crisis that the PFLP had been experiencing since the loss of the Lebanese sanctuary was its constant and unsuccessful quest for a new political initiative that could compete with Fatah's agenda. The fast-changing scenarios in which the PFLP operated forced it to rethink the framework of its opposition to the PLO leadership several times. After 1982, the PFLP tried to present its alternative on the basis of a radical option opposed to Arafat's leanings toward the US and the so-called Jordan option. Again, during the first phases of the 1987 Intifada, the PFLP focused on achieving mass civil disobedience to restrain a PLO leadership willing to capitalise diplomatically on the Intifada. After the signing of the 1993 Oslo accords, the radical foundation of the PFLP's initiatives appeared increasingly weaker. The emergence of Hamas as new, main opposition force as well as the popular inability to dissociate the leftist factions from the PLO leadership jeopardised the PFLP's chances of setting up a credible and effective counterweight to the 'Oslo team'.

With the ultimate failure to delegitimise the peace process and Abu Ali Mustafa's resettlement in the OPT yet another phase opened. Never before the PFLP had to rethink its priorities and its tactical goals to this extent. Such tasks appeared even more urgent as the deadline for final status negotiations between Israel and the PLO approached. The settlement of the conflict that might ensue from final status talks, in the PFLP's view, still equated to the liquidation of the Palestinian cause. During the first half of 2000, the PFLP sought new foundations for its action and new interim goals.

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 basis 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 its agenda. This position mirrored to some extent that which the Popular Front 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 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 patterns 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 Palestinian self-government.[4]

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[1] Abu Ali Mustafa and Nayif Hawatimah, "The Palestinian Secular Opposition at a Crossroads," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 79.
[2] Asʿad Ghanem, *Palestinian Politics after Arafat. A Failed National Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 80-90; Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005),113-115.
[3] Tariq Dana, "Corruption in Palestine: A Self-Enforcing System", *Al-Shabaka*, 2015, accessed on May 22, 2017, https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/corruption-in-palestine/.
[4] Jamil Hilal and Mushtaq Khan, "State Formation under the PNA: Potential Outcomes and their Viability" in Khan, Mushtaq and Amundsen, Inge and Giacaman, George, eds., State Formation in

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, as is shown in this section, reinforced the PNA's state functions without ultimately succeeding in embodying an effective counterbalance to it.[6]

On the level of the official narrative, the PFLP framed the basis of its line starting from the need to define this new phase in the course of the Palestinian national movement. As the PLO Executive Council member ʿAbd al-Rahim Malluh clarified, the Popular Front needed to challenge Fatah and the PNA's public discourse aimed at presenting the current phase as one of coexistence with Israel, in which nationalist commitment equated to contributing to the state-building effort. Despite the implementation of the Oslo accords and the establishment of a self-governing authority with limited powers, 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 'national institutions of the Palestinian people', first and foremost the PLO. Interestingly, the PNA figured as well. Its reconstruction on a democratic basis could 'provide a solid base for Palestinian unity'.[7] Thus, the issue of the democratisation of the OPT political space started to acquire

Palestine: Viability and Governance during a Social Transformation. (London: Routledge, 2004), 80-90.

[5] Rema Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics," *Race & Class* 37 (1995): 52–53.

[6] As also referenced later, for NGOs involvement with the PNA's institutions see Nathan J. Brown, *Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 154–167.

[7] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1302, January, 2000, 20-22.

centrality in the PFLP's view. As Abu Ali Mustafa also pointed out, the presence 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 that mirrored those of the 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 willingness to participate in the state-building process. The Popular Front did not intend to take part directly in such an 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 found a possible realisation in the NGO sector. The Palestinian NGOs active in the OPT at the beginning of the 1990s had their origins in the factional organisations, such as trade unions and women associations, that had developed throughout the previous fifteen years. As mentioned in chapter three, these organisations were started at the initiative of the PLO factions, above all the PFLP, DFLP and Fatah, which wanted to build up their presence in the OPT. Through this effort, the PLO factions challenged the longstanding presence of Palestinian Communists who had dominated political associational life until the late 1970s. PLO penetration in the OPT throughout the 1980s engendered an intense political competition among Palestinian factions, which in turn resulted in the multiplication of popular organisations thus compacting and widening political mobilisation in the OPT. Moreover, the emergence of political Islam in the 1980s contributed to the politicisation of the Palestinian population living under Israeli occupation. The factional cadres, and the organisations they

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[8] Ibid. 11-13
[9] "Mustaqbal Al-Jabha Al-Shaʿbiyya Li-Tahrir Filastin Baʿd George Habash (The PFLP's Future after George Habash)" (Al-Jazeera, 2000), accessed September 5, 2016, http://goo.gl/jUXHPl.

established, formed the backbone and the local leadership of the national movement during the First Intifada.[10]

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 providing all kind of services to the population should stop playing the role of political mobilisers that had allowed the growth of the national movement in the OPT during the 1980s.[11] As a result, NGOs became more professionalised and less politicised as well as gradually lost their direct contact with popular constituencies.[12] Nonetheless, as the PNA installed itself in the OPT, the NGOs, and the civil society they represented, appeared as one of the few spaces effectively independent from the new ruling entity. The NGOs' economic independence started to attract many opposition figures despite their elitist and liberalised 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.[13] 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 thus formed an effective lobbying group that included the largest organisations and was led by secular and leftist activists coming in particular from the PPP and the PFLP.[14] After its formation, the PNGO clashed with the PNA over new legislation regulating NGO status and activity. Between

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[10] Joost R. Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 173–183.
[11] On this see ibid., 38–56.
[12] Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics," 56–57.
[13] Brown, *Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine*, 152–154.
[14] Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics," 59.

1995 and 2000, the PNGO conducted a hard lobbying campaign directed 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-promoted 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.[15]

The conclusion of the conflict over the NGO law essentially marked the end of the debate about their potential transformation into fully-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 observable advantages from this relationship which in turn evidenced their crisis.[16] The leftist factions experienced a significant shrinkage in their party membership, as even a high-ranking official such as Abu Ali Mustafa acknowledged in reference to the PFLP[17], and saw a steady flow of middle cadres heading towards the NGOs. On the one hand, these activists were looking for new possibilities to renew their commitment in the post-Oslo scenario, and apparently the NGOs were the only institutions to provide such framework. On the other, 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 activists with significant expertise.[18] The diminution of active members coupled with the inability to attract mass support further exacerbated the leftist factions' problems of internal renewal.

In addition to this, as the NGOs and the broader context of civil society failed to engender an effective surrogate for an opposition party, the leftist factions were left dealing only with the negative effects of the NGOs' professionalisation.

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[15] Brown, *Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine*, 155–160.

[16] Rema Hammami, "Palestinian NGOs since Oslo: From NGOs Politics to Social Movements?," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 214 (2000): 27.

[17] "Mustaqbal Al-Jabha Al-Shaʿbiyya Li-Tahrir Filastin Baʿd George Habash (The PFLP's Future after George Habash)."

[18] Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics," 58.

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' prerequisite 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. As a consequence, 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.[19] This depoliticising trend was further strengthened as lucrative jobs in the NGOs attracted increasing numbers of young professionals issuing from the urban elite. The influx of these figures widened the gap with the popular masses and exacerbated the NGOs' elitist profile.[20] 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 exponents of the Islamist camp. Hamas' grassroots and charitable 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.[21]

Ultimately, the Palestinian leftist activists' refuge in civil society ended up strengthening the entrenchment of the negative economic and political consequences of the Oslo accords, such as the dependence of Palestinian society on foreign funding and the depoliticization of civil society movements. This had

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[19] Salah Abdel Shafi, "Civil Society and Political Elites in Palestine and the Role of International Donors: A Palestinian View," *EuroMeSCo Paper*, no. 33 (2004): 11–12.

[20] Tariq Da'na, "Disconnecting Civil Society from Its Historical Extension: NGOs and Neoliberalism in Palestine," in *Human Rights, Human Security and State Security. The Intersection*, ed. Saul Takahashi (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2014), 132–138.

[21] Islah Jad, "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements.," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4 (2007): 627–628; Benoit Challand, "A Nahda of Charitable Organizations? Health Service Provision and the Politics of Aid in Palestine," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 2 (2008): 227–228.

a double negative effect on the leftist factions as they appeared increasingly compromised by association with the Oslo regime they claimed to oppose, particularly a hard-line opposition faction such as the PFLP. 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 stressed 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 at the head of the Front.

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.[22] However, in the

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[22] PFLP-Culture Central Department, *Al-Musira al-Tarikhiyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin. Qiraʾ wa ʿArd li-Wathaʾiq Muʾtamarat al-Jabha (The Historic Trajectory of the PFLP. Reading and Presentation of the Front's Conference Documents)* (Gaza, 2010), 247–249.

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, in some form, the political order emerging from potentially successful final-status talks.[23] Concerning negotiations, the PFLP essentially called for a re-inclusion of UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, number 194 in particular, stating the expelled Palestinians' right of return, into the peace process after the Oslo accord had *de facto* excluded them. The underpinning principle was lending true sovereignty to the PNA and that required going beyond Oslo's narrow terms.[24]

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 method of leading the struggle had to be 'employed according to the specificities of each phase', a clear reference to its halt of military activity.[25] The PFLP's focus on institutional politics was also evident in its stress on reviving the role of the PLO. According to the Popular Front, the PLO still represented the ground upon which Palestinian unity should be established, as well as the space to fight 'Oslo legitimacy'.[26] However, if this analysis might have been true in theory, 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

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[23] Mustafa and Hawatimah, "The Palestinian Secular Opposition at a Crossroads," 81.
[24] "Al-Rafiq Abu Ali Mustafa fi Muʾtamar Sahafi bi-Munasabat Ikhtitam Aʿmal al-Muʾtamar al-Watani al-Sadis (Comrade Abu Ali Mustafa in a press conference at the conclusion of the sixth national congress)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1308, 31 July, 2000, 20-22.
[25] PFLP-Culture Central Department, *Al-Musira al-Tarikhiyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin. Qiraʾ wa ʿArd li-Wathaʾiq Muʾtamarat al-Jabha (The Historic Trajectory of the PFLP. Reading and Presentation of the Front's Conference Documents)*, 253–254.
[26] Ibid. 246

to meet Israeli requirements for the progress of the peace process.[27] Consequent upon active PLO disempowerment, popular disaffection towards it grew steadily both in the diaspora and particularly in the OPT.[28] 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.[29] 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 in light of 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 on PFLP affairs more than four hours a day.[30] 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.[31] As Habash resigned some rumours ascribed this decision to dissent with Abu Ali Mustafa over the PFLP's future line. Although a disagreement between the two leaders might have been true, it is not clear on

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[27] Jamil Hilal, "The Polarization of the Palestinian Political Field," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 39, no. 3 (2010): 27–30.

[28] Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage. The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubblication, 2007), 181, 200.

[29] "Istiqalat George Habash (George Habash Resigns)," 2000, , accessed 7 September, 2016http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid_728000/728268.stm.

[30] Conversation with Professor Mahmoud Swayd, Former-Director of the Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, June 2015

[31] "Al-Duktur George Habash fi-l Muʾtamar al-Watani al-Sadis li-l Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya (Doctor George Habash at the Popular Front's Sixth National Congress), *Al-Hadaf*, no. 1308 July, 21 2000, 8-17.

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.[32] 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.[33] The new Secretary-General's desire to keep the military option ready ultimately found hard evidence in the operations that the PFLP was able to launch in the context of 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 on the one hand telling of the PFLP's interest in participating in the post-Oslo political regime. On the other, it 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 a military reorganisation in the OPT.

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[32] Mustafa and Hawatimah, "The Palestinian Secular Opposition at a Crossroads," 18; "Mustaqbal al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin Baʿd George Habash (The PFLP's Future after George Habash)."
[33] Conversation with Professor Mahmoud Swayd, Former-Director of the Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, June 2015, Interview with former PFLP-OPT Cadre Issam Hijjawi, Edinburgh, November 9, 2015.

The Outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

Before addressing the PFLP's conduct during the second Palestinian mass uprising, an outline of the factors that led to its outbreak as well as of the major features that characterised the Al-Aqsa Intifada is needed. In particular, specific aspects which emerged during the Second Intifada greatly affected the PFLP's own agency, contributing to its policy fluctuation. From this stems the need to delineate the most prominent features of the Al-Aqsa Intifada such as its militarisation, intra-Palestinian competition and the fragmentation of the Palestinian political and military agency.

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 ultimate Israeli sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount area since 1967.[34]

However, the underlying factors that led to the so-called Al-Aqsa Intifada took root in an almost 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*

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[34] "Palestinian Chronology 16 August -15 November," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 2 (2001): 197–200.

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 routinized. In fact, the Oslo peace process allowed the production of new Israeli 'facts on the grounds' as well as new repressive practices that rendered the goal of a functioning Palestinian state on the OPT essentially unviable.[35]

The overlapping PLO/PNA leadership, both as a negotiating party and as a government on the ground, 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. Indeed, 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.[36] In light of these developments, as some polls run after the first mass protests showed, a majority of the OPT Palestinian population now opposed the Oslo peace process while the great part of Palestinians supported the resumption of armed struggle as a resistance tool.[37]

In this context, 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

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[35] On economic implication of the Oslo accords and their relation to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada see Sara Roy, *Failing Peace. Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (London Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007), 79–122, 215–293; On the reconfiguration of the Israeli occupation of the OPT after the Oslo accords and on settlement activity during the Oslo era see Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2008), 169–196.
[36] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*, 197–199.
[37] "Peace Monitor. 16 November 2000-15 February 2001," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 131–132.

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.[38] However, Israeli 'facts on the ground,' while compromising the PNA's viability, also jeopardised the chance of success of final-status talks. Furthermore, at Camp David the PLO delegation was presented with an Israeli settlement proposal, the scope of which was far more limited than 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.[39] 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, sealing the *de-facto* end of the peace process conceived in Oslo and Cairo. Against this background, 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.[40]

After this overview of the circumstances that led to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, it is worth delineating some of its main characteristics before analysing the PFLP's involvement in it. The main difference between the First and the Second Intifadas lies 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

[38] "Declaration of Principles on Interim SelfGovernment Arrangements September 13, 1993," *Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process*, accessed January 20, 2017, http://www.unsco.org/Documents/Key/Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements.pdf.

[39] "President Bill Clinton, Proposal for a Final Settlement, Washington, 23 December 2000," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 172–173; "Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), Report on the Camp David Summit, Gaza, 9 September 2000 (Excerpts)," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 2 (2001): 168–170. For two contrasting accounts on the Camp David Summit see Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005); Norman Finkelstein, *Dennis Ross and the Peace Process: Subordinating Palestinian Rights to Israeli "Needs"* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2007).

[40] Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari, "The Second Uprising: End or New Beginning?," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 2 (2001): 7–11.

in the OPT.[41] The professionalisation that NGOs experienced since the Oslo accords led them to focus on advocacy actions such documenting the number of Palestinian fatalities, arrests, Israel's breaching of human rights etc. However, such focus on advocacy prevented the NGOs 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.[42] The militarisation was a result of the Israeli recourse to disproportionate force to curb the initial unarmed demonstrations. Therefore, Palestinian armed operations increased, reaching a pace of 30-40 attacks daily between October and November 2000.[43] 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 this approach 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 operation 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.[44]

At the forefront of the Palestinian military response to the Israeli crackdown was Fatah '*tanzim*'[45], 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*

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[41] Ibid., 12–17.

[42] Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, "The Intifada and the Aid Industry: The Impact of the New Liberal Agenda on the Palestinian NGOs," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1&2 (2003): 205–206; Sibille Merz, "'Missionaries of the New Era': Neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine," *Race & Class* 54, no. 1 (2012): 56.

[43] "Peace Monitor. 16 November 2000-15 February 2001," 128.

[44] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land. Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 238, 246-247.

[45] The term 'tanẓīm' may be translated as organisation, or organised group.

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.[46] Such autonomy was nonetheless to be useful for Arafat himself after the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The PNA President was clearly not in a position that allowed him to 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.[47] 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. Thus, in contrast with the 1987 Intifada, the second uprising appeared a heavily militarised enterprise, devoid of a structured leadership and a wide mass entrenchment.

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[46] Graham Usher, "Facing Defeat: The Intifada Two Years On," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 2 (2003): 23–25.

[47] Hammami and Tamari, "The Second Uprising: End or New Beginning?," 13; Usher, "Facing Defeat: The Intifada Two Years On," 25–26.

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. By virtue of the military assistance received since the Oslo accords, both Fatah's own forces and the PNA's apparatus could count on more fighters and a greater amount of weapons compared to 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. Indeed, 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.[48]

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.

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[48] Khaled Hroub, "Hamas after Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 4 (2004): 25–26.

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's, the PFLP's responsible for 'external affairs', the uprising represented a 'major landmark' from which 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.[49] 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 US, 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 its political underpinning 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.[50] 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 experienced within the NIHC, 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:

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[49] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1311, October 22, 2000, 6-7.
[50] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1314, January 31, 2001, 6-7.

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.[51] The political reconfiguration caused by the Intifada entailed more limited political space for the PFLP as well as 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 fully-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 while 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.[52] Moreover, the Fatah middle cadres and

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[51] Usher, "Facing Defeat: The Intifada Two Years On," 37–38.
[52] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1317, April 30, 2001, 8.

PNA security officers' leading role in the military initiative, as well as the formation of the cross factional Popular Committees, allowed the PFLP to hope that a critical mass within Fatah was now in favour of relinquishing the failing Oslo peace process. In fact, 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.[53] In this context, the PFLP actively 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 Popular Front went as far as to claim 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.[54] While this number appears to be an exaggeration that probably included unplanned operations led by unaffiliated individuals and groups, nonetheless the PFLP was in fact 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.[55]

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 giving a clear sign that it was fully supportive of the 'new phase of the struggle' by cutting all contacts with Israel and the US. 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 UN resolutions to the negotiating

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[53] International Crisis Group, *Who Governs the West Bank? Palestinian Administration Under Israeli Occupation* (Amman/Brussel, 2004), 22–27.
[54] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1317, 9.
[55] "Chronology: 16 November 2000-15 February 2001," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 194; "Chronology: 16 February - 15 May 2001," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 4 (2001): 181, 186; "Chronology: 16 May- 15 August 2001," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 156–157, 167.

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 Front'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.[56]

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.[57] 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 step that the PNA should undertake to capitalise effectively on the uprising.[58] In line with this goal, the PFLP's cadres tried to move on the regional level especially because substantial

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[56] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1314, 23-25.
[57] Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, "Suicide Bombings as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada," *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 1976–1982.
[58] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1318, May 31, 2001, 4-5.

Arab support for the Intifada still failed to materialise. Indeed, ʿAbd al-Rahim Malluh, acting as 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.[59]

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. Indeed, polls on the popularity of the Palestinian factions run throughout the Intifada hinted at a sharp increase for Hamas, which polled better than Fatah, and a clear decline for leftist factions.[60] 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 August 27, 2001, further pushed the PFLP towards the global Palestinian military trend of single-faction, retaliatory armed operations.[61] As Israel's assassination campaign dealt a hard blow to the PFLP, it 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 7 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.[62]

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[59] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1320, July 31, 2001, 14-15.
[60] Jamil Hillal, "Hamas's Rise as Charted in Polls, 1994-2005.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 3 (2006): 7–8.
[61] "Chronology: 16 May- 15 August 2001," 171.
[62] Esposito, "The Al-Aqsa Intifada: Military Operations, Suicide Attacks, Assassinations, and Losses in the First Four Years," 121-122.

The PFLP's Retaliation and the Election of Ahmad Saʿadat.

In light of 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 at the head of the Front. The PFLP's ability to fulfil these tasks appears particularly significant if viewed against the conduct of the Popular Front in the remaining years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Indeed, the retaliatory operation organised by the PFLP and the election of a leader who issued from the OPT network could hint at both an effective military apparatus and to 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 of coping with the larger scale consequence 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.[63] 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.[64]

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

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[63] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1321, September 20, 2001, 3.
[64] Hroub, "Hamas after Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi," 28.

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, in the form of the well-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.[65] 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 ʿAhid 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.[66] 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.[67]

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.[68] The Israeli

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[65] Kataʾib Abu Ali Mustafa, "17 Oktober, al-ʿAyn bi-l-ʿAyn (17 October, An Eye for an Eye)," accessed October 05, 2016, https://goo.gl/ey29kE.
[66] Kataʾib Abu Ali Mustafa, "Tafasil al-ʿAmaliyya al-Kamila li-Tasfiyya Rehevam Ze'evi (Complete Details of the Operation to Eliminate Rehevam Ze'evi," accessed October 06, 2016, goo.gl/AbnczE.
[67] "Palestinian Chronology 16 August -15 November," 184.
[68] Rosa Hasan Hamid, "Qatl al-Wazir Zeʾevi (The Killing of Minister Ze'evi)" (Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, 2008), 20, http://www.kataebabuali.ps/malafat/kat17.pdf.

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 Muqataʿa, the compound where he resided in Ramallah from then on.[69]

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 toward 'inside' cadres. Indeed, the PFLP's leaders took into consideration the names of two OPT leaders, namely Ribhi Haddad and Ahmad Saʿadat, both prominent leaders of the Palestinian prisoners' movement.[70] Ultimately, the committee elected Saʿadat as the new PFLP Secretary-General on 3 October, 2001 while ʿAbd al-Rahim Malluh was assigned the post of deputy.[71] Saʿadat's name was not among those of the most renowned PFLP leaders; this was mainly due to 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

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[69] Esposito, "The Al-Aqsa Intifada: Military Operations, Suicide Attacks, Assassinations, and Losses in the First Four Years," 89–90.

[70] Interview with former PFLP-OPT Cadre ʿIssam Hijjawi, November 9, 2015, Edinburgh.

[71] "Awwal Muʾtamar Sahafi li-Amin ʿAm al-Shabiyya al-Jadid (First Press Conference of the PFLP's Secretary General", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1323, November 3, 2001, 8-9.

election to the Secretariat, he fulfilled the post of PFLP Head in the West Bank.[72] Despite the different political backgrounds of the late Abu Ali and Saʿadat, this did not lead to significant change in the PFLP's agenda. Saʿadat's 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, analysis of the PFLP response to Abu Ali's assassination highlights the Front's ability to answer its tactical priorities while not achieving change in the strategic dimension.

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.[73] 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

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[72] "Al-Amin Al-ʿAm (The Secretary-General)," *PFLP Official Website*, accessed October 06, 2016, http://pflp.ps/ar/index.php?act=page&id=6.

[73] "Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," *Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process*, 1995, accessed on January 21, 2017 http://www.unsco.org/Documents/Key/Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.pdf.

inflicting severe civilian casualties.[74] 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 constituted one of the main covers for the siege that the Israeli army laid on the Muqataʿa.[75] Consequently, pressure mounted on the PFLP from both Israeli security forces that started targeting and arresting an increasing number of Popular Front 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, national unity remained a priority therefore the Popular Front 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 Saʿadat'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.[76] 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, Saʿadat 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. Saʿadat went so far as

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[74] *Erased in a Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks against Israeli Civilians.* (New York-Washington-London-Brussels: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 11–14.

[75] Rema Hammami, "Interregnum: Palestine after Operation Defensive Shield," *MERIP Middle East Report* 223, no. 223 (2002): 19–20.

[76] Amnesty International, "Israel/Occupied Territories/Palestinian Authority: Ahmad Saʿadat Must Be Released and His Safety Ensured," News Service No.: 100, June 13, 2002.

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.[77] In line with this position, the PFLP criticised the PNA for responding promptly to US 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.[78] By the same token, the PFLP espoused critical views concerning Hamas and Islamic Jihad's military strategy. Although suicide bombings represented a legitimate means 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 Popular Front, 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. [79]

Despite the official ideological framework and the criticism addressed to '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

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[77] "Muqabala maʿ al-Rafiq al-Amin al-ʿAm Ahmad Saʿadat bi-Munasab al-Dhikr al-Rabiʿa wa al-Thalathin li-Intilaqa al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Interview with Comrade Secretary-General Ahmad Saʿadat for the 34th anniversary of the PFLP's Foundation)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1326, February 9, 2002, 6-12.
[78] "Bayan Siyasi Sadir ʿan al-Maktaba al-Siyasiyya li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Political Statement issued by the PFLP's Politburo), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1327, March 9, 2002, 6-7. Michele K. Esposito, "Quarterly Update on Conflict and Diplomacy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 3 (2002): 119.
[79] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1326, February 9, 2002, 61-63.

'outside' perceptions and 'inside' realities. On the one hand, the political leadership, still partly located outside the OPT, formulated a political discourse focused on collective action and nationalist priorities. On the other, 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 4 over a total of 7/9 between 2001 and 2005.[80] 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. The 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.[81] 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 operation in an attempt to respond to pressures coming from its base.[82] 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, similar to impacts on the *tanzim*/AMB and other groups mainly based in the West Bank.[83] In a further similarity with the *tanzim*, the PFLP leadership and ground 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

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[80] Esposito, "The Al-Aqsa Intifada: Military Operations, Suicide Attacks, Assassinations, and Losses in the First Four Years," 105-108.

[81] "Chronology: 16 February - 15 May 2002," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 4 (2002): 199, 204; "Chronology: 16 May - 15 August 2002," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 1 (2002): 171–172, 180; "Chronology: 16 November - 15 February 2003," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 3 (2003): 167.

[82] Interview with former PFLP-OPT Cadre ʿIssam Hijjawi, November 9, 2015, Edinburgh.

[83] Hammami, "Interregnum: Palestine after Operation Defensive Shield," 20–22.

Committee members were detained, either by Israel or the PNA. Among them, and in addition to Secretary-General Saʿadat, were his deputy Malluh, Politburo Member and PFLP Spokesperson ʿAli Jaradat, as well as Military Leader ʿAhid Abu Ghalma.[84]

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 US and Israel on the one hand and with the Palestinian factions on the other. 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 Muqataʿa.[85] In these circumstances, the PFLP hoped to play a positive role in drawing Hamas and Fatah closer. This was not only to 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 Popular Front 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

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[84] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1331, June 20, 2002, 8.
[85] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority. From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*, 251–253.

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 Saʿadat and other Palestinian prisoners from the Muqataʿa compound to Jericho prison, where their custody would be under US and UK supervision.[86] 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.[87] 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.[88] In addition, the US 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

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[86] Hammami, "Interregnum: Palestine after Operation Defensive Shield," 21.
[87] "President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," 2002, accessed October 11, 2016, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html.
[88] "The Road Map," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 4 (2003): 88–93.

Palestinian resistance activities.[89] 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 US and Israel pushed for was totally in contrast with the PFLP view of democratising the PNA's institutions and revitalising the PLO.[90] 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.[91]

In this context, the PFLP presented to the whole Palestinian national movement several 'initiatives' or 'visions' throughout 2003 in the 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

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[89] Michele K. Esposito, "Quarterly Update on Conflict and Diplomacy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 4 (2002): 151–152; Michele K. Esposito, "Quarterly Update on Conflict and Diplomacy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 1 (2002): 120–122.

[90] "Bayan Siyasi Sadir ʿan al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Political Statement Issued from the PFLP)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1330, May 31, 2002, 18.

[91] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1336, December 10, 2002, 17.

was well underway in the midst of the Al-Aqsa Intifada.[92] Such proposals revolved around the idea of forming a unified national leadership and reviving the framework of the PLO. Both veteran 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.[93] 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 as well as not wanting to formally commit to the framework of a Palestinian state limited to the OPT.[94] 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 of the institutional implications of its initiatives, the PFLP outlined a kind 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 program relating to the OPT.[95] Beyond these aspects related to institutional reform, the PFLP tried to bolster its initiative by invoking

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[92] Hilal, "The Polarization of the Palestinian Political Field," 25–27.

[93] "Ruʾyat al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin li-Tawhid al-Quwwa al-Wataniyya wa al-Islamiyya hawla Mashruʿ Barnamaj Watani Filastini (The PFLP's Vision to Gather the Palestinian Nationalist and Islamist Forces around a Palestinian Nationalist Program)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1338, February 5, 2003, 6-7.

[94] Hroub, "Hamas after Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi," 34; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1340, April 5, 2003, 14-16.

[95] *Al-Hadaf,* No. 1340, 3; *Al-Hadaf,* No. 1346, October 5, 2003, 13-14.

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 Saʿadat, the US call for a new Palestinian leadership, and their requirements concerning a stronger, autonomous government, underscored the divisive effect of the Road Map.[96]

Indeed, 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.[97] However, internal factors also impeded a wider and more effective dialogue. If on the one hand, both the Bush administration and the Sharon government overtly called for 'regime change' in Ramallah, on the other 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.[98] Therefore, Hamas' calculation did not change even after Israel's assassination of its spiritual leader Shaikh Ahmad Yassin and top leader ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Rantisi, as well as

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[96] *Al-Hadaf,* No.1346, 8-12.
[97] Graham Usher, "The Palestinians after Arafat," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 3 (2005): 48.
[98] Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrel, *Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 91–105.

after Sharon announced his decision to disengage army and settlement installations from the Gaza Strip.[99] 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.[100]

The PFLP, too, was interested in finding its role in case Arafat really would leave power and intra-Palestinian talks on reforms would reach 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 fully 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.[101] 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.[102] 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

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[99] Usher, "The Palestinians after Arafat," 50–51.
[100] Hillal, "Hamas's Rise as Charted in Polls, 1994-2005," 7–8.
[101] "Quaterly Update on Conflict and Diplomacy," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003): 123; "Chronology: 16 February - 15 May 2004," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 4 (2004): 196.
[102] "Mubadara Wataniyya li-Himaya al-Jabha al-Dakhiliyya wa Tahqiq al-Islah al-Dimuqrati (National Initiative to Protect the Internal Front and Realise the Democratic Reform)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1356, September 5, 2004, 14-15.

political programs and adherence to armed struggle in the context of the ongoing military uprising on the ground.[103]

Yasser Arafat died on November 11, 2004 and the Palestinian national movement as a whole entered almost immediately a phase of transition, the first consequence of which was the end of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The PFLP's readiness to fully embrace such a transition 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.[104] 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.[105] Although the PFLP did not support Abbas during the election, it nonetheless ensured its 'collaboration on the shared parts of the political program'.[106] 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.[107]

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

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[103] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1340, April 5, 2003, 14-16

[104] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1361, January 5, 2005, 6-7.

[105] "Al-Jabha al-Shabiyya tadʿum Mustafa al-Barghouthi wa Israʾil Taʿrqil Harakat al-Murashahhin (The Popular Front supports Mustafa Barghouti and Israel impede the candidates' movements)", *Al-Jazeera,* accessed on May 23, 2017, https://goo.gl/RNHa97.

[106] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Statement Issued from the PFLP)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1362, February 2005, 2-3.

[107] "Al-Nass al-Harfi li-Iʿlan al-Qahira al-Sadir ʾan al-Fasaʾil al-Filastiniyya 17-03-2005 (The Text of the 'Cairo Declaration' Issued from the Palestinian Factions)," *Wafa Info*, 2005, accessed November 2, 2016 http://info.wafa.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=4894.

eventually solidified during the 2006 legislative elections.[108] 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 Saʿadat's continued detention as results of the Intifada dynamics 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. Saʿadat's leadership benefitted from his credentials as underground activist and leader of the prisoners' movement, but his continued detention deprived him of the chance to effectively take the reins of the Front. 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 ʿAbd 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.[109]

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 the light of its mediating position, a 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.

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[108] Hillal, "Hamas's Rise as Charted in Polls, 1994-2005.," 7–12.
[109] Hroub, "Hamas after Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi," 34–36.

The 2006 Legislative Elections and the Hamas-Fatah Split: 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.[110]

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, on the one hand, 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. On the other, Hamas after the Al-Aqsa Intifada was for the first time in a political position that allowed it to challenge Fatah primacy over the Palestinian national movement.[111] While the two main Palestinian organisations had conflicting agendas, rendering 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

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[110] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1369, September, 2005, 12-13; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1370, October, 2005, 14-16.

[111] Graham Usher, "The Democratic Resistance: Hamas, Fatah, and the Palestinian Elections," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 3 (2006): 22–26.

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, the appointment of PFLP-affiliated candidate Janet Mikhaʾil as mayor of Ramallah.[112] Nonetheless, the PFLP's need to remain engaged within the PLO and PNA framework determined, as it will be shown, a shift closer to Fatah and the PNA leadership.

The decision to run in the January 2006 elections set to define the new composition of the 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.[113] 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, Fidaʾ and Mustafa Barghouti's Palestinian National Initiative (PNI).[114] Ultimately, after months of talks, Ahmad Saʿadat announced to the Palestinian news agency Wafa that the PFLP would run its own list in the upcoming elections in the light of 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, Saʿadat 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 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.[115] Both factions reportedly claimed they should be allocated the 20 per cent of the seats won in

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[112] Manal A. Jamal, "Beyond Fateh Corruption and Mass Discontent: Hamas, the Palestinian Left and the 2006 Legislative Elections," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (July 2013): 281.

[113] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1370, 15-16.

[114] "Presidential Elections Final Results," 2005, accessed November 8, 2016, https://www.elections.ps/Portals/0/pdf/SummaryPresidentialElectionsFinalResults2005.pdf.

[115] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1373, January, 2006, 16-17.

the elections, as each of them took credit for the 20 per cent that Barghouti scored during the previous 2005 Presidential elections.[116]

As a consequence, the Palestinian leftist factions formed three different lists, thus irremediably scattering their supporters' vote. This appeared particularly penalising in the light of the parallel proportional and district-based systems that the electoral law delineated. 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.[117] 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. Indeed, 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.[118] 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 program centred on reforming all aspects of Palestinian institutions and governance allowed Hamas' 'Change and Reform' list to win 74 seats in stark contrast to the 45 seats assigned to Fatah.[119]

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[116] Jamal, "Beyond Fateh Corruption and Mass Discontent: Hamas, the Palestinian Left and the 2006 Legislative Elections," 289–291.

[117] Jamal, "Beyond Fateh Corruption and Mass Discontent: Hamas, the Palestinian Left and the 2006 Legislative Elections,": 289–290; Central Elections Commission Palestine"The Second 2006 PLC Elections. The Final Distribution of PLC Seats," 2006, accessed November 8, 2016 https://www.elections.ps/Portals/0/pdf/The final distribution of PLC seats.pdf.

[118] Usher, "The Democratic Resistance: Hamas, Fatah, and the Palestinian Elections," 24–26.

[119] Jamal, "Beyond Fateh Corruption and Mass Discontent: Hamas, the Palestinian Left and the 2006 Legislative Elections," 274; 283–285; Khaled Hroub, "A 'New Hamas' Through Its New Documents," *Journal Of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 4 (2006): 7–15.

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.[120] Fatah's reaction, as that of Israel and the US, 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, while 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 as it stopped transferring taxes to the PNA. The US 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.[121] Abbas' move to contain the new Hamas government signalled the first phase of a power struggle that did not remain limited within 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.[122]

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 Popular Front welcomed Hamas' success as a 'victory of the Intifada program' which implied the Palestinian people's rejection of the Oslo paradigm. On the other, 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

[120] Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, "Special Poll - 01 January 2006," 2006, accessed January 23, 2017, http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/476; Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, "Special Poll - 21 January 2006," 2006, accessed January 23, 2017, http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/477.
[121] Graham Usher, "Hamas Risen," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 238 (2006): 3–7.
[122] Beverley Milton-Edwards, "The Ascendance of Political Islam: Hamas and Consolidation in the Gaza Strip," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (2008): 1586.

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.[123] 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 the Popular Front from directly joining the cabinet.[124] 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 Saʿadat. The US and UK forces supposed to monitor the PNA detention of Saʿadat 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.[125] The PFLP harshly criticised the PNA, despite its security forces resisting the attackers for twelve hours, and Saʾeb ʿErekat, Minster of Negotiations, acknowledged the PNA's mistake in detaining Saʿadat. According to the PFLP, the 'Palestinian official leadership' abided by the agreement concerning Saʿadat 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'.[126]

However, with the ongoing Hamas-Fatah power struggle, the PFLP moved towards a neutral position between the two contenders as it hoped 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' ʿAbd al-Khalik al-Natshe to PFLP's ʿAbd al-Rahim Malluh. The document, submitted to

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[123] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1376, April, 2006, 4-5
[124] Ibid.,6-7.
[125] "Amnesty International Statement of Concern about Jericho Prison Raid.," 2006, accessed November 10, 2016 http://freeahmadsaadat.org/2006/06/19/amnesty-international-statement-of-concern-about-jericho-prison-raid/.
[126] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1376, 26-27.

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'.[127]

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 revolved around 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.[128]

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. In fact, the PFLP's rejection of the February 2007 Mecca Agreement that Hamas and Fatah reached thanks to Saudi mediation, came as an evidence of this. 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

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[127] Intisar Abu-Khalaf et al., eds., *Towards Palestinian National Reconciliation* (Ramallah and Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2011), 42–45; "Wathiqa al-Wifaq al-Watani (National Consensus Document)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1379, July 2006, 12-13.
[128] "Mubadara Watania Nataqaddam bi-ha li-l-Jamiʿ (National Initiative Presented to All)", *Al-Hadaf,* 1378, June 2006, 12-13.

PLO'.[129] The PFLP put forward the contents of this letter to justify its negative position toward 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.[130] But what the PFLP really protested was its exclusion from this reconciliation deal and the bilateral nature of the agreement. In fact, Hamas had signalled its acceptance of the Oslo accords' result when Khalid Mishʿal publicly declared that his movement recognised that the 'PNA was founded on the basis of Oslo' and agreed to 'deal with this reality'.[131] 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/PNA 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 abiding 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

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[129] "PA President Mahmud Abbas and Hamas Political Leader Khalid Mishal, Mecca Accord," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 3 (2007): 189.
[130] "Bayan Sadir ʿan al-Maktab al-Siyasi li-l-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Statement Issued from the PFLP's Politburo)", *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1387, March, 2007, 6-7; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1288, April, 2007, 10-11.
[131] Usher, "Hamas Risen," 5.

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.[132] 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 hard liners.[133] 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.[134] 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 when, 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.[135]

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

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[132] Milton-Edwards, "The Ascendance of Political Islam: Hamas and Consolidation in the Gaza Strip," 1586–1587.

[133] The boost of US military assistance to Fatah-controlled forces in the aftermath of the 2006 legislative elections aimed at ousting the Hamas government came to be known as the "Dayton plan", named after US Lieutenant General Keith Dayton who coordinated with Muhammad Dahlan to set up the plan. The publication of leaked documents concerning US-Fatah coordination in April 2007 contributed to igniting Hamas-Fatah tensions. For more details on the "Dayton plan" see: David Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell," *Vanity Fair*, 2008, accessed November 16, 2016, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/gaza200804; Emilio Dabed, "Decrypting the Palestinian Political Crisis. Old Strategies Against New Enemies: Chile 1970-73, Palestine 2006-09," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2010): 80–84.

[134] International Crisis Group, *After Gaza* (Amman/Jerusalem/Gaza/Brussels, 2007), i, 7–9.

[135] Milton-Edwards, "The Ascendance of Political Islam: Hamas and Consolidation in the Gaza Strip," 1586–1587.

government and against the principle of 'political partnership' stated by the PNA's laws.[136] 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. Indeed, the PFLP denounced the violation of a specific agreement that the Popular Front itself rejected as well as the collapse of a national unity government in which it refused to partake.

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 newly-elected Hamas government to one closer to Fatah and the PNA Presidency. Although the Popular Front criticised Abbas' decision to dissolve the national unity government and establish an emergency executive, its position substantially validated Fatah's stance towards Hamas.[137] In fact, 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 reference to 'external pressures' on the Haniyeh government were present in the PFLP's discourse, there was no mention of the widely known relationship between the Bush administration and Fatah hard-liners 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.[138] 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

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[136] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1391, July, 2007, 14-15.
[137] "Bayan Siyasi Sadir ʿan al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya li-Tahrir Filastin (Political Statement issued from the PFLP), *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1391, July, 2007, 1.
[138] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1391, 20-21; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1392, August, 2007, 20-21.

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 point appears more relevant if one takes into consideration the PFLP's frequent decision in its history to boycott PLO institutions in order to deprive them of national legitimacy when it opposed the line of the PLO leadership.[139]

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 (the PLO/PNA) which ensured institutional integration and economic survival for its cadres. The continuous inability of the PFLP, 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.[140] Consequently, the credibility of the PFLP's political agency appeared definitively jeopardised 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 go beyond the five or seven seats obtained, reflected to some extent the persistent inability of the Popular Front to reverse such a decline in its popularity.[141] Today, the PFLP's marginalisation appears all the more

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[139] "Al-Nass al-Kamil li-Mudakhalat al-Jabha al-Shaʿbiyya fi Dawrat al-Majlis al-Markazi bi-Tarikh 18-07-2007 (The Complete Text of the PFLP's Introductory Speech during the Central Council session)," *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1392, August, 2007, 10-11; *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1393, September, 2007, 12-17

[140] *Al-Hadaf,* no. 1393, 23-25; Haidar Eid, "Dis-Participation as a Palestinian Strategy?," *Al-Shabaka*, 2013, accessed November 17, 2016, https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/dis-participation-as-a-palestinian-strategy/.

[141] "Local Elections 2012 Final Results", Central Elections Commission, 2012. Acessed November 17, 2016. http://www.elections.ps/Portals/0/pdf/LE2012/LE2012_FinalResults_EN.pdf; Student Council

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.[142]

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.

Between Abu Ali Mustafa's return to Palestine in 1999 and the 2007 Hamas-Fatah split, the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma continued to exert its influence, intertwining with the peculiar tensions which emerged during this period. Thus, policy fluctuation continued to mark the PFLP's agency as it sought integration into a transforming Palestinian political environment. In fact, maintaining some form of political influence by participating in the post-Oslo system had been the PFLP's main goal since the second half of the 1990s and continued to be a priority through the phases covered in this chapter. The unfolding of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the tensions that its dynamics produced, as well as its political results, shaped the following phase and exacerbated the opposition-integration dilemma, emphasising the PFLP's fluctuations.

The discourse around the democratisation of the OPT political space and the transformation of the PNA institutions into the new core of the Palestinian national movement signalled the PFLP's shift towards active participation in the

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elections results can be found at official university websites. Following are those for Birzeit University: "Kutlat al-Shahid Yasir ʿArafat Tahsul ʿala 26 Maqʿadan bi-Intikhabat Jamiʿa Birzeit (The Martyrs Yasser Arafat Bloc Gains 26 Seats in Birzeit Univeristy Elections)," 2012, accessed November 17, 2016 https://www.birzeit.edu/ar/news/ktl-lshhyd-ysr-rft-thsl-l-26-mqdan-bntkhbt-jm-byrzyt; "Intikhabat Majlis al-Talba 2013 (2013 Student Council Elections)," 2013, accessed on November 17, 2017, https://www.birzeit.edu/ar/news/ntkhbt-mjls-ltlb-2013; "Nataʾij Intikhabat Majlist al-Talba Jamiʿa Birzeit 2016-2017 (2016-2017 Results of Birzeit University Student Council Elections)," 2016, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.birzeit.edu/ar/news/ntyj-ntkhbt-mjls-tlb-jm-byrzyt-2016-2017.
[142] Khaled Elgindy, "Lost in the Chaos: The Palestinian Leadership Crisis," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2015): 138–140.

post-Oslo regime. The PFLP thus seemed to call for opposition to the PNA's leadership rather than to the PNA itself an Oslo-derived institution. This new opposition trend in the PFLP, and in the whole Left, took the form, on an informal level of the engagement of leftist activists in civil society politics and more specifically in NGO activities. At an institutional and formal level, the PFLP called for reform of the PLO in order to supervise the PNA and for renewed unity of the national movement to fight PNA corruption and authoritarian drift, a task that required continued contact with Fatah's leadership. However, on an institutional level, the conflation of the PLO and the PNA, and the role of the first as 'nationalist cover' for the latter, deprived the PFLP's discourse of practical implications. On a civil society level, the role of leftist activist within western-funded NGOs fostered the perception of a Palestinian Left fully compromised with the Oslo political and economic regime. Therefore, the PFLP oscillated between its oppositional discourse and *de facto* inclusion into the Oslo political system on which it had no real influence. Consequently, while the PFLP's opposition appeared token, this reinforced Hamas' stand as the real radical opposition force.

With the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the PFLP hoped for a reconfiguration of the Palestinian national movement based on consensus among the factions, a context in which it would have exerted greater influence. This represented the ideal scenario for the PFLP's inclusion into a national movement distancing itself from strict adherence to the terms of the Oslo accords. However, the peculiar dynamics of the Al-Aqsa Intifada drove the PFLP to fluctuate between a '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. As the uprising quickly evolved into an asymmetrical military confrontation, the PFLP called for coordination among the Palestinian factions. In fact, the PFLP's own actions swung between joint armed operations and single actions that followed either a retaliatory pattern or priorities dictated by intra-factional competition, as the recourse to suicide bombings demonstrated. On the political level, too, factional calculations prevailed over collective action, an aspect that appeared particularly clear after

Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank in 2002, the intensification of US and Israeli efforts to replace the Palestinian leadership, and the beginning of Palestinian dialogue on reforming the PNA and PLO institutions that initially involved all factions. On the one hand, Hamas prioritised the continuation of military confrontation to reinforce its political position as Palestinian radical actor. On the other, the PNA's rationale for supporting intra-factional dialogue stemmed from its need to enforce a unilateral ceasefire, thus alleviating Israeli military pressure. Similarly, Arafat's call to reform the PNA was a step to comply with US and Israeli requirements. In this context, the PFLP's 'national initiative' aimed at realising consensus among the factions, and displayed positions responding both to Hamas and PNA priorities, underscoring the mediating role that the PFLP was willing to play and its positions moving between the line of the two main Palestinian forces. Ultimately, the Al-Aqsa Intifada showed the PFLP's predicament and its policy fluctuation on the military and political level. This, coupled with the severe repression experienced that peaked with Abu Ali Mustafa's assassination, made the Al-Aqsa Intifada a milestone of the PFLP's political marginalisation.

Following Arafat's death and the end of the uprising, the PFLP's main priority was again institutional integration into the new political arena that was being shaped. This led the Popular Front to full acceptance of the PNA's Oslo-derived institutions despite its formal rejection of the US-supervised peace process. Therefore, the PFLP supported all the institutional steps of the post-Intifada transition, such as the 2005 presidential elections and the 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.

To conclude, the issue of institutional integration and the policy fluctuations that derived from it remain relevant in the framework of the continued PFLP marginalisation. Despite the legitimacy crisis that both Hamas and the Fatah/PNA camp currently experience, the PFLP appears unable to embody an effective 'third way' due to its fluctuation between its traditional role of opponent of the Oslo peace process and its need to integrate into the political system that this process has created. This conclusion ultimately highlights the role that the PFLP's agency, and specifically its policy fluctuation, still continues to play in the perpetuation of its political irrelevance.

Conclusions.

The present study has adopted a historical and processual perspective to address the decline that the PFLP experienced between 1982 and 2007, ultimately determining its marginalisation within Palestinian politics. The significance of an in-depth analysis of this process of decline lies in its role within the current crisis of legitimacy and representation that is affecting the Palestinian national movement. Indeed, the inability of the Palestinian Left and its main faction to embody an alternative to the two governing entities in the OPT, Hamas in Gaza and the PNA in the West Bank, is a fundamental factor behind such a crisis. Both the historical and processual perspectives that inform this study involved 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 focus on subjective factors entailed a problematisation of the PFLP's marginalisation process. The goal was outlining 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.

As a result, this thesis identifies the fundamental tension that marked the PFLP's political agency throughout the 25-year period covered. Such a tension, or dilemma, derived from the PFLP's contradictory position of adherence to the PLO as its main institutional framework whilst maintaining an opposition 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. While rejecting the process that established the PNA, the PFLP maintained its association with its ruling party Fatah, and did not disengage from a PLO *de facto* deprived of its authority by the PNA. The present study describes this underlying tension influencing the PFLP's agency as an opposition-integration dilemma, since the PFLP tried to balance its opposition role with its interest in remaining integrated within the official Palestinian institutions. 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 (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.

Beside identifying such opposition-integration dilemma, this study also defined the policy pattern that such tensions produced as well as highlighting the interconnection of this fundamental tension with other sources of pressure influencing the PFLP. The PFLP's attempts to balance these two contrasting political dynamics 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 its political credibility. While policy fluctuation stemmed mainly from the opposition-integration dilemma, other contradictions or sources of pressure emphasised this negative pattern. In fact, 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 throughout the period covered.

The pattern of policy fluctuation stemming from several levels of tensions and the underlying opposition-integration dilemma consistently undermined the PFLP's position within the Palestinian national movement, contributing to its current marginalisation. 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 the decades observed in this study points to the centrality of this dynamic among the factors behind the PFLP's decline. More precisely, while negative external developments (such as the loss of the Beirut base or the 1991 PLO economic crisis following the Gulf War) 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. Therefore, the exploration of the PFLP's use of its ideological doctrine allowed on the one hand to highlight a certain pragmatism, as ideology served the PFLP's political shifts, thus disavowing those views that claim an overall PFLP intransigence. On the other, it underlined the pervasiveness of the policy fluctuation pattern as it strongly influenced the PFLP's reliance on its doctrinal tenets.

The persistence of the opposition-integration dilemma and the consequent policy fluctuation pattern 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. Put differently, the core problems affecting the PFLP's agency seemed to compromise its bid to embody the alternative 'third way' within the currently polarised Palestinian national movement.

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. The following overview recalls the recurrence of these aspects throughout the timespan studied.

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 nor under Gorbachev's new course. Ultimately, the failure of the PFLP's agenda in this period, due to its swings between multiple sources of tensions, contributed to strengthening Arafat's grip on the PLO.

Analysis of the PFLP's conduct during the First Intifada highlighted 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 US. 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 Marxist-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, the PNA included. 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. Thus, 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 a 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 problematics. 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 Saʿadat, 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 2006-2007 Hamas-Fatah split, and its continued adherence to a token mediating role well after the occurrence of such a split, confirmed the presence of a policy fluctuation pattern. In the light of this, today, unless such fundamental contradictions are resolved, the PFLP has little chance of finding new effective agency, reacquiring its lost political weight, and embodying an alternative to the current Palestinian political deadlock.

Implications of the Study.

This research represents an addition to the current literature on the Palestinian national movement that lacked a PFLP-dedicated study of such scope. One implication of such an addition is related to our understanding 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 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 most important implication of the present study lies in its contribution to an understanding of the PFLP's predicament and decline. Indeed, the present research complements socio-economic reasons for the decline of the PFLP with factors stemming from its own political agency, thus filling a gap in the current literature and historiography that tends to focus on the former factors. In addition to improving the knowledge of the PFLP, this study can also help in understanding the current Palestinian political impasse, as Palestinian politics in the OPT and the diaspora alike are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and representation. Therefore, the issue of the PFLP's inability to set up an effective Palestinian 'third way' is not only telling of its persistent marginalisation. In fact, given the absence of other actors effectively challenging the polarisation of Palestinian politics, the PFLP's failure in pursuing such a goal represents a central cause of the long-standing Palestinian political deadlock. More specifically, the priorities shaping the PFLP's policies, first and foremost integration into the Palestinian institutional frameworks, point in turn 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 the current underrepresentation of Palestinian diaspora communities in the national movement. Similarly, such an institutional focus prevented the formulation of a political discourse and line tackling the serious social issues affecting the Palestinian population in the OPT. For instance, the PFLP stopped addressing labour organisation, widespread youth unemployment and growing poverty in its political proposals. 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 points made throughout the study concerning the PFLP's need for integration in the Palestinian institutions, its lack of ideological and organisational renewal and the gradual alienation of grassroots support, 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 reflect the stagnation of PFLP political thinking. Such stagnation is widely linked to the problematic aspects that the present study highlights, such as its inability to disengage from traditional Palestinian political institutions and platforms.

The focused analysis of the PFLP's decline featured in this study also demonstrated the need to further investigate both 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. This might be the case for other leftist factions in the region and beyond while in other instances, subjective factors may have determined the resilience and resurgence of leftist politics, notwithstanding a global negative trend.

Some of the concepts elaborated on the PFLP's case may result informative for the study of other national liberation movements in the region and beyond. Above all, the concept of opposition-integration dilemma might be employed in the analysis of Marxist factions' participation to wider national fronts. The Middle East and North Africa offer some examples (e.g. Egypt) of leftist forces competing and collaborating with the nationalist leaderships of the movement in which they took part. The idea of applying the concepts outlined in this thesis to other cases also hints to possible comparative approaches. Thus, the in-depth treatment of the PFLP's case represents the needed bases from which to move with possible comparison. In other words, the present study provides some preliminary concept elaboration on a leftist national liberation movement whose development is essential prior to a comparison with any similar organisation. In fact, the concern for a thorough discussion of key ideas is what determined the choice to focus on the PFLP's case, thus paving the way to a comparative

expansion of this study. The benefits of such preliminary elaboration are better evidenced if the hybrid nature of the PLO and the PNA, as non-state actors with fundamentally state-like characteristics, is taken into consideration. The political dynamics that both the PLO and the PNA engendered, and the discussion of the PFLP's relation with them, suggest that the case outlined in this study may not only be compared to factions within national liberation movements, but also to organisations acting in the framework of state politics.

Beside the concepts elaboration, also the methodology and the perspective adopted in this research might be borrowed in the context of investigations looking at either other Palestinian factions or opposition forces in other national frameworks. Indeed, the diachronic-synchronic reading of textual, primary sources could be easily replicated in other instances as well as the use of focus on political agency as analytical lens to appraise political trajectories. Again, the present study embodied a viable implementation of such methodological approaches which should precede the replication of methodology in potential comparative frameworks.

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 a contribution, grounded in the field of historiography, 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.

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