

# Insurgent Culture: Strategy and Strategic Change in the Palestinian National Movement

Sam Biasi

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the department of Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Boston College  
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences  
Graduate School

January 2024



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Sam Biasi

Advisor: Peter Krause Ph.D. Associate Professor, Boston College

## **ABSTRACT**

How do insurgent organizations form their strategies? Existing scholarship focuses on either strategic effectiveness or the exogenous conditions that produce specific strategies; there is significantly less work on how insurgents select between strategies or how those choices iterate into strategic change over time.

The theory of insurgent organizational culture posits strategic preferences are produced by organizational culture. A significant body of scholarship analyzes the effect of organizational culture on state militaries and private businesses, but there has not yet been a systematic treatment of organizational culture's effect on non-state militant organizations, i.e., insurgents. These organizations exist in a state of uncertainty, and their search for information is a powerful driving factor in the formation and evolution of their strategy. But there are a multitude of sources an organization can pull information from. Insurgent organizations differ in how they prioritize these different sources of information and how easily they are moved to change tact by new information; respectively, their embeddedness and reactivity. These two variable qualities comprise insurgent organizational culture, which determines how insurgents convert information into strategy and strategic change.

I use the Palestinian National Movement to develop this theory and weigh it against alternative explanations, comparing the organizational culture of Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas. Analysis of primary sources and original interviews with key figures in Palestinian politics demonstrates these three organizations vary significantly in their organizational culture, leading to radically different approaches to strategy even under similar conditions and pursuing similar goals. Insurgent organizational culture theory shows that insurgent strategy is produced in an iterative process of rational updating rooted in organizational culture's different prioritization of information and impetus for action under uncertainty; in so doing, it can explain variation in insurgent strategy more precisely than purely rationalist theories.

## Table of Contents

<u>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Chapter 2: Non-State Strategy: Debates and Concepts .....</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>Chapter 3: Theory of Insurgent Organizational Culture.....</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>Chapter 4: The Palestinian National Movement: Jordan.....</u>	<u>71</u>
<u>Chapter 5: The Palestinian National Movement: Lebanon .....</u>	<u>131</u>
<u>Chapter 6: The Palestinian National Movement: The First Intifada and the Oslo Accords.....</u>	<u>181</u>
<u>Chapter 7: The Palestinian National Movement: The Second Intifada .....</u>	<u>241</u>
<u>Chapter 8: Conclusion .....</u>	<u>314</u>
<u>Bibliography .....</u>	<u>338</u>

## List of Tables and Figures

<i>Table 1: Approaches to the Causes of Insurgent Strategy</i>	15
<i>Table 2: Types of Information</i>	37
<i>Table 3: Roles, Qualities, and Sources of Types of Organizational Culture</i>	41
<i>Table 4: Birzeit University Elections 1994-1999</i>	255
<i>Diagram 1: Theory of Insurgent Organizational Culture</i>	34
<i>Figure 1: Typology of Insurgent Organizational Cultures</i>	52
<i>Figure 2: Typology of Insurgent Strategies</i>	58
<i>Figure 3: Organizational Culture of Palestinian Militant Organizations</i>	71
<i>Figure 4: Fatah Strategy: 1965 – 1975</i>	82
<i>Figure 5: PFLP Strategy: 1965 – 1975</i>	83
<i>Figure 6: Fatah Strategy: 1975 – 1987</i>	128
<i>Figure 7: PFLP Strategy: 1975 – 1987</i>	129
<i>Figure 8: Fatah Strategy 1987 – 1994</i>	178
<i>Figure 9: PFLP Strategy 1987 – 1994</i>	178
<i>Figure 10: Hamas Strategy 1987 – 1994</i>	179
<i>Figure 11: Fatah Strategy 1995 - 2005</i>	235
<i>Figure 12: PFLP Strategy 1995 - 2005</i>	236
<i>Figure 11: Hamas Strategy 1995 - 2005</i>	236

### *Acknowledgements*

This project owes its completion and quality to the community that has supported me throughout this process. First, to my advisor Peter Krause, who took a chance on me as one of his first advisees; without his commitment to my academic and professional development, I would not be half the scholar I am today. I owe my teaching skills to him as well, as I have scarcely seen a professor treat their students as he did: with the deepest regard for their development as students and people. Ask anyone on his Project Team, and they will tell you few professors are so willing to give meaningful work and teach advanced research skills to undergraduates, a trust and respect that few undergraduates are afforded. I hope I can carry those lessons forward in my own teaching.

I also owe enormous thanks to the other members of my committee. Thanks to Tim Crawford, whose earnest curiosity and scholarly insight helped me develop some of my best ideas that fed into this dissertation. More than that, thanks to him, I've developed a lifelong love for the classics of International Relations, and I will remember the incredible discussions in and out of his class whenever I see E.H. Carr on my shelf. I would perhaps have never even touched political science if not for Ora Szekely, who taught me Middle Eastern politics is not only fascinating, but cool—the “Star Wars of international politics”. Her advice on my undergraduate thesis persists in this dissertation, seven years later; more importantly, I would never have had the confidence to undertake this project without her constant support and belief in me as a scholar. So thank you, Ora, for starting me on this path, and helping me every step of the way.

My other Political Science professors at BC were also instrumental in my scholarly development, and without whom this dissertation would not exist, or would at least be significantly worse. I would like to thank in particular David Deese, Lindsey O'Rourke, Thibaud Marcesse, Ali Banuazizi, Jennifer Erickson, Lauren Honig, Jonathan Kirshner, and Jonathan Laurence. I'd also like to thank Kay Schlozman, whose advice and support for my first time teaching were essential in my pedagogical education.

I was told the advantage of a small program like BC was closer relationships with my professors. This is undoubtedly true, but equally true were the deeper ties with my incredible peers. Special thanks must go to Tyler Parker, my peer from the start, my coauthor, and my dear friend; I am the scholar and the person I am today because of our long conversations, his thoughtful edits and critiques, and our shared passion for understanding the world. Thanks to Tyler, I am a better person and scholar (and a far better Arabic speaker) than I ever would have been otherwise. I would also like to thank Emily Kulenkamp, Sarah He, and Inhwan Oh for their camaraderie and example, each incredible people and academics in their own right.

This project owes much to Boston College, particularly the Aggad Fellowship; I would like to thank Kathleen Bailey and Tarek Aggad for their absolutely critical support in planning and funding my fieldwork. Enormous thanks are due also to Hiba Boukhari, whose generous help secured me some of my most exciting interviews. And to my interviewees, who remain anonymous, I owe enormous gratitude: thank you for sharing your stories and lives with me and trusting me to share them further. I'd also like to thank Samira Jarrar for her help navigating the streets of Ramallah, securing interviews, and being a sounding board for ideas; as well as a great friend in a difficult time.

I would never have made it through this process without the help of family and friends. Special thanks are due to Lauren Howard and Eileen Donovan-Kranz for their copyediting assistance—I appreciate your critical eye and acceptance of my love for em dashes. Most of all, thank you to my wife, Becca Kranz, for supporting me fiercely for the last 7 years. I lack the words to fully express my gratitude for your love, kindness, and generosity throughout the writing process, and I look forward to taking any newfound free time to travel widely and breathe the ocean air with you. Thank you for everything, and if you ever write a dissertation, I promise I will support you just as much.

Lastly, I'd like to dedicate this dissertation to the people of Gaza, whose ongoing bravery and resilience in the face of death, destruction, and brutality are a testament to the indomitable human will.

## [1]

**Introduction**

In his 1981 autobiography, a prominent Fatah official named Abu Iyad describes two factions within Fatah and the Palestinian national movement of the 1960s: the “reasonablists” and the “adventurers”. Of course, Abu Iyad referred to his own faction as the reasonablists, and accused the adventurers of being either stupid or agents of Israel.<sup>1</sup> This was a statement intended to be in English and written for Western audiences. Abu Iyad was primarily concerned with ensuring Fatah leadership came off as rational, thoughtful, and careful, while those who pushed for violence and terrorism were framed as foolish amateurs. The irony here, of course, is that Abu Iyad had likely helped plan the 1972 attack on the Munich Olympics—a terror attack which resulted in the deaths of 11 Israeli athletes and coaches, which previously earned him and Fatah the label, given by Arab nationalist moderates, of “adventurers”.<sup>2</sup> This stands in stark contrast to his later push for negotiation with Israel before the Oslo Accords. Indeed, Fatah leaders during and after the Oslo negotiations would spill an enormous amount of ink critiquing the actions of Hamas and other opponents of the negotiations, using verbiage nearly identical to critiques levied at Fatah only a few decades prior. Why Fatah’s change from “adventurers” and terror to “reasonableness”? What happened to Abu Iyad—indeed, to Fatah—that caused such a drastic shift in strategies? And why was a hardened anti-colonial guerilla like Abu Iyad so concerned with Western perceptions of himself and Fatah as unreasonable?

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Iyad and Eric Rouleau, *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle*, trans. Linda Butler Koseoglu, 1st edition (New York: Times Books, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

Other Palestinian militant organizations underwent similarly confusing strategic evolutions. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was infamous for hijacking airplanes, which raised its public profile and attracted new recruits; it nonetheless gave up the tactic and expelled its progenitor after a few years, fearing being viewed as too radical or violent. But twenty years later, PFLP fighters were detonating suicide bombs in crowded public areas. Their Islamic counterpart, Hamas, evolved slowly out an apolitical and pacific movement, becoming in a few short years the most radically violent organization in Palestine. Fatah, Hamas, and the PFLP evolved in noticeably different ways with strategies that changed drastically over time. All three organizations sought to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine and set out to do so with violent resistance. How can we understand the divergent paths of strategy among these organizations?

These paths are best explained by each group's distinct organizational culture. Insurgent organizations must gather and interpret complex information under extreme uncertainty. Organizational culture allows them to make sense of all this, form plans, and act despite uncertainty. Other explanations may show what strategies are ideal and why they were not used, but the theory of insurgent organizational culture can explain iterative strategic change over time.

### **The Puzzle: Three Organizations, Three Distinct Paths**

What drives insurgent strategy? Certainly there's no one strategy that works always across contexts; insurgents must examine conditions and make a plan. Frequently, however, organizations stand side-by-side, look at the same situation, and come up with

wildly different strategies. The PFLP and Fatah looked at conditions following the disastrous 1967 Arab-Israeli War—the militarily weak Arab states, the uniquely strong Israeli forces, the rising disunity of Arab strategy towards Israel, and the increasing social and political malaise among Palestinian refugees—and proceeded to formulate strategies that bore little resemblance. The PFLP turned to dramatic acts of international terrorism, especially airplane hijackings, while Fatah pursued a guerilla war against Israeli forces inside the newly occupied West Bank and decried such attacks. Later, Fatah would manage to make a political arrangement with Israel to build towards a Palestinian state. Palestinian challengers to Fatah in the PFLP and Hamas observed this, alongside other extant conditions. Hamas proceeded to begin a campaign of brutal suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, while the PFLP sought to foment civil unrest and agitation against Fatah’s negotiations.

These organizations shared goals—they all, approximately, wanted to found a Palestinian state that would permit Palestinian refugees to return and include Jerusalem as its capital. They would accept, at different times, different compromises and concessions to this eventual goal. But they nonetheless shared it throughout the conflict. How could organizations looking at the same situation and sharing the same ends come to such radically different conclusions about how to get there? What was different about each of these organizations if not their goals or strategic conditions?

### **How Insurgent Organizational Culture Drives Group Strategy**

I argue that the strategies of insurgent organizations like Fatah, Hamas, and the PFLP are primarily determined by their organizational culture. Insurgencies are arenas

rife with uncertainty, precluding rational planning. Instead, organizational cultures drive the formation and evolution of military strategy, providing the methods and priorities in insurgent's search for military, social, and political information. New information can convince an organization a strategy is unpopular and must be changed, that a strategy has run its course and is therefore obsolete, or that something in the environment has changed such that strategic change is necessary or desirable. But new information is often a constant torrent and organizations must determine what information is important, especially when different sources of information diverge. Moreover, information must be ordered and interpreted into action. There is no single, ideal way to fulfill these tasks: they require judgements in uncertainty. Organizational culture simplifies this task by specifying which sources of information are most important and how to interpret new information then convert it into strategy.

There are a multitude of sources an organization can pull information from. Insurgents differ in how they prioritize different sources of information, a quality determined by how embedded they are in a social movement versus international society.<sup>3</sup> An insurgent organization embedded in their social constituency, given perfect information from a state sponsor and its constituency, will always prioritize the constituency's preferences over the state sponsor. Equally important is how readily they change strategies when faced with periods of great uncertainty—their reactivity. Reactive groups, when the way forward is unclear, will experiment with new strategies to forge its

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<sup>3</sup> Anoop K. Sarbahi, "Insurgent-Population Ties and the Variation in the Trajectory of Peripheral Civil Wars," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 10 (September 1, 2014): 1470–1500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013512602>; James Moody and Douglas R. White, "Structural Cohesion and Embeddedness: A Hierarchical Concept of Social Groups," *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 1 (2003): 103–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088904>.

path, while unreactive groups are more likely to rely on old habits and continuing existing strategies. These two variable qualities of reactivity and embeddedness comprise my definition of insurgent organizational culture, which determines how insurgents convert information into strategy and strategic change.

The central hypothesis of this theory is that non-state militant organizations form their strategies culturally. Strategy is the imagined plan for victory, but non-state militants rarely have a clear path: they almost always face an opponent that wields overwhelming force, legitimacy, and international support relative to the insurgents. That insurgent victory is so difficult makes insurgent beliefs and ideas about strategy more important than they would be if the history or structure of the conflict offered clear methods for victory. Not only do they face these challenges, but they must plan in a distinctly non-professional context where military strategy is necessarily politicized, so measuring effectiveness requires not only assessing how strategy strengthens the organization or weakens the enemy, but also how it is politically perceived by constituencies and international supporters. Charting a course through these treacherous waters requires a map, which insurgent organizations construct through gathering information about their own capabilities, enemy capabilities, popular opinion, and the configuration of the international system.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Studying organizational culture benefits from a qualitative approach, since unlike businesses it is exceedingly difficult to conduct mass surveys of active non-state militant organizations. Additionally, organizational culture is constitutive, and thereby

ontologically prior to many of the alternative explanations for insurgent strategy. This renders the task of eliminating competing arguments problematic. Instead, in this dissertation I focus on theory *development* rather than theory *testing*. I also take a less structured approach to comparison in light of the challenges of identifying the effects of something as ephemeral as organizational culture. New comparative methodologies have moved away from controlled comparisons to produce generalizable theories, instead focusing on “translation”. Simmons and Smith write,

To compare with an ethnographic sensibility also changes the goal of comparison. The goal of most quantitative or controlled comparative methods is to develop either “generalizable” arguments or arguments that “travel” or are “portable” to other contexts; that is, the goal is to find patterns of politics that are mechanistically produced across broadly similar political contexts. By contrast, we advocate for a different goal for comparative research: translation. ...much like with linguistic translation, the goal of comparing for translation is to develop ideas that are intelligible or recognizable in a different context, even as the context will change the ways in which an idea or political practice is interpreted or enacted.<sup>4</sup>

As the edited volume from which this is drawn shows, this kind of “uncontrolled” comparison has a strong history in political science, ranging from Samuel Huntington’s *Political Order in Changing Societies* to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* to Charles Tilly’s *Coercion, Capital, and European States* to Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject*.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, I use an “encompassing comparison”, drawn from Charles Tilly as reconstituted by Jillian Schwedler,<sup>6</sup> which,

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<sup>4</sup> Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, “Comparisons with an Ethnographic Sensibility: Studies of Protest and Vigilantism,” in *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, ed. Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108966009.012>.

<sup>5</sup> Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, eds., “Rethinking Comparison: An Introduction,” in *Rethinking Comparison*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108966009.001>.

<sup>6</sup> Jillian Schwedler, “Against Methodological Nationalism: Seeing Comparisons as Encompassing through the Arab Uprisings,” in *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, ed.

...aims to understand how individual cases are structured by their relationship to some larger process(es), institution(s), or entity(ies), to which other cases are also connected... an encompassing comparison is a move away from an analysis based on the identification of explanatory variables and toward telling a rich story of complex connections and power relations. More than simply adding background, it involves embedding the local within larger connections, processes, structures, and historical time lines of the sort that also move away from thinking in terms of outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

To be clear, there is an interest in outcomes here, but these outcomes are not independent or permanent but iterative and fluid. In seeking to develop a theory of insurgent organizational culture, a case study was an appealing methodology as the greater level of detail helps to fully contextualize theoretical dynamics and mechanisms that may be difficult with more cases. However, a single case study would preclude identifying multiple organizational cultures and thereby raise challenging questions about what causal strength organizational culture has compared to other explanations, in particular the materialist arguments that suggest insurgent strategy should be highly limited. An encompassing comparison allows me to examine multiple organizations within the same insurgency and compare them. Accepting that these cases would not be independent of one another, comparing them would nonetheless yield better understanding of how strategy is made on the organizational level both in reference to competing organizations and the enemy state. By treating organizations as parts of a greater whole, I can better develop theory that explains insurgent strategy as a product of organizational culture than with a single case study or a controlled comparison.

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Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 172–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108966009.009>.

<sup>7</sup> Schwedler.

For these reasons, I chose the Palestinian national movement—and three key organizations within it, Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas—as my case and sub-cases. In large part this was because of Htun’s advice for using comparison for theory development: “select units for your study that offer interesting variation in whatever you wish to understand more about, including possibly key variables, concepts, mechanisms, or scope conditions... In other words, you should select objects of study that differ in whatever phenomenon you aim to learn about.”<sup>8</sup> These three organizations have interesting variation in their organizational cultures and strategies over time, also featuring lengthy lifetimes, multiple campaigns, and a wealth of information on their strategic thinking and its changes over time. In particular, that these groups act so vastly differently under seemingly similar or identical circumstances helps to undercut arguments about structure and relative power and suggest ideational differences may be influencing strategy. There was necessarily a practical element as well: my training in Levantine Arabic made actors in the northern Middle East more accessible, many Fatah and PFLP leaders and fighters are retired and thereby convenient to interview safely and ethically, and Palestinian militant organizations were constantly publishing strategic tracts and interviews in their various newspapers and journals that give solid at-the-moment information about what leaders and fighters at the time believed and presented to the public. This approach necessitates detailed information to tightly trace the changes in not just strategy but strategic thought, making the Palestinian revolution an appealing case based on accessibility as well as theoretical fit.

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<sup>8</sup> Mala Htun and Francesca R. Jensenius, “Comparative Analysis for Theory Development,” in *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, ed. Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 190–207, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108966009.010>.

The case of the Palestinian national movement is split into four longitudinal periods divided by major changes in strategic context. The first, 1965 – 1975, sees the PFLP and Fatah form and begin to launch a cross-border insurgency against Israel from inside Jordan. Their subsequent exile to Lebanon, despite attempts to relaunch a Jordanian front, begins the second period, running 1975 – 1987. The third period of 1987 – 1994 begins after the Palestinian guerillas' exile to Tunisia and the formation of Hamas within occupied Palestine, then ends with the Oslo Accords. The final period, 1994 – 2005, sees Fatah and the PFLP returned to Palestine, and now competing with Israel finally within the homeland they had been fighting to reclaim. These changes in geographic base also coincide with institutional changes: Fatah taking over the PLO and entering the United Nations towards the end of the first period, Fatah's complete neopatrimonial capture of the PLO by 1987, and of course the newfound Palestinian institutions formed by the Oslo Accords starting in the mid-1990s. I trace the process of decision-making based on the information available to organizational leadership, using interviews and primary source documents to assess the strength and clarity of different types of information at a given time. This recreates the thinking of the organizations at the time of decision-making such that the effect of organizational culture (in this case how they prioritize and order information and act within informational constraints) can be identified and compared across organizations.

The experience of the Palestinian revolution is a strong case for insurgent organizational culture theory. Across all four time periods, the Palestinian militant organizations were preoccupied with certain kinds of information while blatantly ignoring others, formed strategies with little relation to material reality based on limited

information and imperfect models, and, during moments of overall weak information, were driven to either experiment with new strategies or replay old ones depending on their cultural preferences. Most importantly, strategy was not learned over time nor was it perfected through rational updating. In fact, there are only a small handful of moments of critical self-reflection for the Palestinian insurgent organizations between 1965 and 2005. When strategies changed, it was almost always due to culturally-informed responses to changes in information, which was always contingent and incomplete.

### **Implications of Insurgent Organizational Culture for Policy and Theory**

In challenging conventionally and primarily rationalist work on insurgent strategy, the theory of insurgent organizational culture calls attention to the most central feature of insurgency: uncertainty. In centering uncertainty as the undergirding force of insurgent strategy, this study necessarily makes a contingent and descriptive argument about a specific context, much of which lacks generalizability. But there are two critical generalizable findings of interest I will discuss here.

First, if insurgent organizations are understood to be faced with constant uncertainty, their access to information becomes their defining feature. This is not determinative, as there's no way to know what an organization will do with little to no information. But it does suggest that insurgent strategy can be manipulated by access to information; from a counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism perspective, cutting certain lines of information—that is, the preferences of state sponsors or civilian constituencies—may make organizations less radical or violent. An insurgent organization with a state sponsor pushing radical violence will more easily be influenced

by diplomatic wedge strategies, especially if they have a constituency or alternative sponsors that oppose violent or terrorist strategy.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, an organization pushed to radical violence by a pro-violence social constituency is more likely to be moved away from violence by community work, propaganda, and amnesty. The Weather Underground is a good example of the latter case; pushed to violence by the failures of radical student politics in the 1960s, the changes and indeed the dissolution of their social constituency through a combination of political concessions, socio-economic changes, and the simple passage of time led them to give up on violence, especially after offers of amnesty. Most turned back to peaceful political work or their private lives.<sup>10</sup>

Second, though organizational culture requires deep qualitative study to identify, the theory of insurgent organizational culture can give policymakers and scholars better tools to predict behavior iteratively by systematizing complex cultural processes into digestible preferences. Throughout this dissertation, I repeatedly show Fatah ignoring a social constituency in favor of negotiating with other militant organizations and states. It would come as no surprise after reading all this to find that in 2023, Fatah's central means of resisting increasingly radical Israeli policy in the West Bank has been calling on international institutions to condemn Israel while pursuing action in the International Criminal Court, even as Palestinians express majority support for a return to armed action and a near-consensus disapproval of Fatah's strategy.<sup>11</sup> This theory cannot claim to predict how specific strategies will unfold, but as a framework it can provide powerful

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011): 155–89.

<sup>10</sup> Cronin, Audrey, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). 103.

<sup>11</sup> "Public Opinion Poll" (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, June 28, 2022), <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/912>.

tools to predict changes in action based on changing information and iterative performance.

### **Dissertation Plan**

This dissertation proceeds as follows. First, in Chapter 2, I examine the literature to identify and compare existing explanations for non-state strategy. In doing so, I not only frame the issues at hand but also position my own theory within the larger literature and as growing out of implied and tangential arguments about insurgent organizational culture that have not yet been systematized into a theory. In Chapter 3, I then turn to laying out the theory in full, both explaining the mechanisms that make it function and the outcomes I expect to find in the case studies. Then I break down the Palestinian revolution into four constituent parts based on crucial points of strategic and structural change: Chapter 4 tracks the foundations of the PFLP and Fatah in Jordan, Chapter 5 their subsequent exile to and then from Lebanon, Chapter 6 covers Hamas' founding in the First Intifada and the return to Palestine after the Oslo Accords, and finally Chapter 7 details the *de facto* collapse of the Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada. I conclude in Chapter 8 by comparing these findings to alternative arguments and reflect on the generalizable lessons and dynamics brought forward by my theory of insurgent organizational culture.

### Non-state Strategy: Debates and Concepts

The strategies and strategic outlook of non-state actors are oft-studied. Since the 9/11 attacks, terrorism in particular has enjoyed enormous scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> This has since expanded into a broader literature on non-state militaries, which has produced critical knowledge and live debates about how non-state actors fight. However, most theories on insurgent strategy are limited to a rational choice approach even as work on state militaries have increasingly emphasized organizational culture as a powerful explanation for strategy. The conceptual lines between state and non-state militaries are blurring both due to the growing strength in non-state militaries and arguments that, functionally, a military organization is a military organization.<sup>2</sup> Empirically and theoretically, there needs to be a systematic examination of culture as an explanation for non-state military strategy.

Insurgent strategy and organizational culture are two mostly independent literatures that I hope to synthesize. The aim is to show that there is a critical gap in the insurgent strategy literature that the organizational culture concept helps to fill. Reviewing the scholarly work relevant to this study therefore requires investigating studies across disciplines, methodologies, and epistemological approaches. First, I review the literature on insurgent strategy to pinpoint missing variables and assess each

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<sup>1</sup> Brian J. Phillips, “How Did 9/11 Affect Terrorism Research? Examining Articles and Authors, 1970–2019,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 2 (February 17, 2023): 409–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1935889>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias* (Princeton University Press, 2021), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691207513/nonstate-warfare>; Jessica A. Stanton, *Violence and Restraint in Civil War: Civilian Targeting in the Shadow of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107706477>;

argument's explanatory power. Then I collate arguments about organizational culture and strategy in state actors to extract principles for forming a new theory of insurgent organizational culture as a major cause of insurgent strategy. I conclude by showing that, while not systematic, other scholars have treated organizational culture as a central explanatory variable in non-state strategy.

### **Causes of Insurgent Strategy**

The question of insurgent strategy has been critical since insurgents began winning wars more frequently and civil wars became the dominant form of violent conflict in the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> Work on insurgent strategy, however, has suffered from conceptual barriers as individual strategies receive treatments independent of potential alternatives. As Chenoweth writes on the strategy of terrorism,

...I suggest viewing terrorism as one part of a larger repertoire of contention. Very few studies take seriously the relationships between terrorism, insurgency, civil war, nonviolent civil conflict, and electoral politics. Yet all of these activities are linked, often quite closely, and are often motivated by the same kinds of factors. The field would benefit from incorporating a wider view of contention, so as to identify the processes that produce terrorism and provide groups with viable alternatives to using it.<sup>4</sup>

Analyzing a group's strategy based on their entire potential repertoire does more than include alternatives for completeness' sake; in investigating how insurgents discriminate between potential strategies, especially over time and across interactions, new questions arise. What are the material requirements of undertaking a strategy? How do past and

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 4; Meredith Reid Sarkees, Frank Whelon Wayman, and J. David Singer, "Inter-State, Intra-State, and Extra-State Wars: A Comprehensive Look at Their Distribution over Time, 1816-1997," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2003): 62.

<sup>4</sup> Erica Chenoweth, "Terrorism and Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (2013): 355–78, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-032211-221825>.

contemporary uses of the strategy impact a group's thinking? Does competition affect the selection of strategy? And, perhaps most importantly, how are strategic preferences formed within an organization? The array of answers to these questions forms approximately four schools of thought, named for the factors they argue drive strategic choice: materialists, structuralists, institutionalists, and culturalists.

*Table 1: Approaches to the Causes of Insurgent Strategy*

Approach	Independent Variable Causing Strategy	Relevant Scholars
<b>Materialists</b>	<i>Relative power</i> : weakness vis-à-vis state constrains insurgent strategy	Van Creveld (1991), Weinstein (2006), Arreguin-Toft (2006), Ucko (2009), Zambrano et. al. (2017)
<b>Structuralists</b>	<i>Competition</i> : position within hierarchy of insurgency undergirds strategy	Bloom (2004), Cunningham (2013), Krause (2014), Pischedda (2020)
<b>Institutionalists</b>	<i>Internal political institutions</i> : ideal mid-range strategy permitted or precluded by insurgent institutions	Stanton (2016), Stewart (2021), Biddle (2021)
<b>Culturalists</b>	<i>Cultural beliefs</i> : strategy determined by a national or ethnic culture's ideals, norms, and rules	Lawrence (1935), Schultz & Dew (2009), Fukuyama (2012), Bozeman (2015)

*Materialists: Strategy caused by relative power*

Materialists argue that insurgent strategy is determined centrally by their relative material capabilities. More specifically, they contend insurgent strategy is constrained to

guerilla tactics and terrorism due to their weakness vis-à-vis the state.<sup>5</sup> Usually this is framed in terms of efficacy and the surprising victories of weaker actors over stronger. For materialists, insurgent organizations are rational actors that make strategic decisions on the basis of their relative weakness. Insurgents recognize they are at a disadvantage in terms of raw power and seek to exploit their mobility, surprise attacks, and soft or civilian targets to make up the difference and exhaust a better-equipped enemy.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, the insurgent's strategic heuristic is to avoid direct confrontations that would decisively defeat the insurgents.<sup>7</sup>

Weinstein's *Inside Rebellion* is perhaps the most prominent materialist argument. Weinstein's focus is on the use of violence against civilians and how discriminatory groups are in employing it; this is distinct from an argument about strategy, whether to target civilians is an integral strategic question for insurgent groups. His basic premise is that insurgent disposition towards violence is determined by their initial resource endowment. Initial endowments encourage certain recruitment and organization-building strategies that attract certain kinds of recruits. Groups with social endowments attract committed recruits that will follow orders and, critically, buy in to the political project. Groups with primarily economic endowments are more likely to attract opportunists, who

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<sup>5</sup> Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*; Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, 1st edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2009), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/13042>; Adam Lockyer, "The Dynamics of Warfare in Civil War," *Civil Wars* 12, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2010): 91–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2010.484906>; Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge ; New York, N.Y., USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict Since Clausewitz*, First edition (New York : Toronto : New York: Free Press, 1991); Andrés Zambrano and Hernando Zuleta, "Goal and Strategies of an Insurgent Group: Violent and Non-Violent Actions," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 23, no. 2 (April 1, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1515/peps-2016-0039>.

<sup>6</sup> Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*; Creveld, *The Transformation of War*; Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*.

<sup>7</sup> Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*.

are more likely to loot, use brutality to ensure civilian compliance, and abandon the organization when it suits them. Thus, more socially embedded groups are more likely to use selective violence and make consensual arrangements with civilians while richer organizations are more likely to indiscriminately use violence and coerce civilian cooperation.

In terms of military strategy, Weinstein's argument has one central implication: initial material endowments limit the availability of future resources, including (and especially) human resources. This puts limits on strategy; an opportunistic group cannot feasibly muster a standing force capable of directly combatting a state military. They also cannot undertake non-violent strategies, as their limited control over their fighters is maintained only by permitting their looting and indiscriminatory violence. Activist groups, those with social endowments, have the opposite problem of needing the support of locals to keep fighting. This makes strategy of terrorism more difficult in that it may disrupt or upend civilian support. Activist groups' access to local knowledge, meanwhile, makes guerilla warfare more appealing as it improves the ability of insurgents to hide. Initial resource endowments are largely determinative of strategy for Weinstein in a way that belies the thinking of other materialist: insurgent strategy is determined mostly by the limitations on their capabilities.

Other materialists do introduce a greater agency for insurgents. Arreguin-Toft, for example, notes that insurgent strategic interaction with the state determines their likelihood of victory. Both state and insurgent strategies are direct or indirect, and insurgents have the advantage when these strategies are mismatched, i.e., the insurgents have an advantage when using an indirect strategy against a state's direct strategy and

vice versa.<sup>8</sup> But this model of insurgent strategy is fixated on effectiveness such that the materialist underpinnings remain. Insurgent strategy is only effective for Arreguin-Toft when avoiding direct confrontation with the state military because the primary factor in insurgent strategy is, again, their limited relative capabilities.

The assumption that insurgents need asymmetric strategy to fight the state—and that strategic choice is determined primarily by the military demands of fighting a more powerful enemy—constitutes the materialist position. Some materialists have argued that weakening states and new diffusion of military technology will shift insurgent strategy towards a mix of conventional and asymmetric warfare, reaffirming the basic premise that relative power determines strategy.<sup>9</sup> However, organizations with similar strengths relative to their enemy state have often used widely divergent strategies; materialists cannot account for the extra-rational constraints or impetuses that determine strategy as powerfully as relative strength.

*Structuralists: Strategy caused by competition*

Structuralists argue that insurgent strategy is driven by the structure of the insurgency; that is, the degree of competitiveness between insurgent organizations and their relative power. These scholars point to competition as driving strategic inefficiencies in favor of organizationally effective tactics.<sup>10</sup> Structuralists broadly accept

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<sup>8</sup> Arreguin-Toft.

<sup>9</sup> Creveld, *The Transformation of War*; Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*; Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War*.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Krause, “The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness,” *International Security* 38, no. 3 (January 1, 2014): 72–116, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00148](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00148); Mia M. Bloom, “Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20202305>; Costantino Pischetta, “Wars Within Wars,” in *Conflict Among Rebels, Why Insurgent Groups Fight Each Other* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 1–16,

the materialist arguments, seeing the ideal insurgent strategy as a function of the power and size of a group relative to the state; they add, however, the causal factor of intra-insurgency relative power as well.<sup>11</sup> The key feature of insurgency for structuralists is competition. A hegemonic group—one that is large and without peer competitors—would theoretically behave the same as materialists would expect.<sup>12</sup> However, when insurgents must contend with other groups, strategy becomes more complicated as other insurgent groups may be seen as just as much of an obstacle to victory as the enemy state. Militant organizations behave differently when seeking to empower their organization vis-à-vis others instead of pursuing purely strategic goals of fighting the state; these interests are determined by their position in an insurgency's hierarchy. Weaker groups will be more likely to use violence for outbidding and spoiling; stronger groups will try to restrain the weaker ones while attempting to make strategic gains.<sup>13</sup> Outbidding and spoiling can fairly be classified as a strategy of terrorism—it's both usually the empirical truth and the logical endpoint of both interactions.

Most structuralists focus on how competition drives strategic failure as organizational goals overtake strategic goals and violence is used in a strategically counterproductive way. The perverse incentive of being a subordinate in the hierarchy of an insurgency drives this problem: if the most powerful group is likely to garner all the spoils of victory, then it is in the interest of the weaker group to postpone strategic

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<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/pisc19866.4>; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Understanding Strategic Choice: The Determinants of Civil War and Nonviolent Campaign in Self-Determination Disputes," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (May 1, 2013): 291–304, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313475467>.

<sup>11</sup> Cunningham, "Understanding Strategic Choice." 295.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Krause, "The Structure of Success." 79.

victory until it can overtake the leader as the dominant group.<sup>14</sup> Cunningham adds to this by identifying the conditions favorable to violent or non-violent strategies, showing competition drives violence while relative unity (or, at least, size of the group relative to the state) drives non-violence.<sup>15</sup> This is because non-violent campaigns require large mobilizations that divided insurgencies cannot coordinate, and each organization in a divided insurgency will have difficulty establishing credibility when making demands of the state because they cannot control other organizations.<sup>16</sup> Cunningham misses one critical factor that only strengthens the argument for division driving violence: frequently, insurgents are competing for the same limited, usually human, resources. This is especially true of coethnic groups who pull support from the same populations.<sup>17</sup> Competing for resources, popularity, and military dominance makes inter-insurgent violence more attractive as defeating a weaker group improves the surviving group's ability to credibly commit to deals with the state, allows them to absorb the resources and support from the defeated group, and ensures they will enjoy any potential boons from success.

Structuralist thought on insurgent strategy differs from materialists primarily in their attention to how strategy is formed as much by the challenges of managing an organization as defeating the state. The management of organizations and the imperatives of intra-insurgency, inter-organizational competition can have a strong effect on strategy. Structuralists and materialists agree, however, that relative strength is the most important determinant of strategy—structuralists merely include other insurgent organizations in

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<sup>14</sup> Krause. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Cunningham, "Understanding Strategic Choice." 295, 296.

<sup>16</sup> Cunningham; Krause, "The Structure of Success."

<sup>17</sup> Pischedda, "Wars Within Wars."

this calculation. Neither perspective engages meaningfully with the question of how strategic preferences—for competition, for particular means, for particular ends—are formed in a militant organization. These preferences can powerfully affect how groups perceive their organizational and strategic interests. It may be that hegemons may act more strategically while challengers act more competitively; but what strategy they see as fulfilling those goals is rooted in their constitutive preferences.

*Institutionalists: Strategy caused by insurgent political institutions*

Institutionalists, meanwhile, deny the underpinnings of materialists and structuralists, arguing strategy is driven by the internal political institutions of an insurgent organization. These internal processes generate preferences, constrain capabilities, and inform underlying goals.<sup>18</sup> The central argument for institutionalists is that the degree to which an insurgent organization can—or will want to—develop a military capable of defeating the state is determined by their internal politics.

Institutionalists vary in their focus, sharing their causal variable of political institutions but focusing on different aspects of strategy ranging from governance<sup>19</sup> to civilian targeting.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of political institutions covers a variety of qualities an insurgent organization may have. Insurgent political institutions in the institutionalist telling vary in three central ways: democratic accountability, transformative-ness, and legal-rationality.

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<sup>18</sup> Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias*; Megan A. Stewart, *Governing for Revolution: Social Transformation in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108919555>; Jessica A. Stanton, “Strategies of Violence and Restraint,” in *Violence and Restraint in Civil War: Civilian Targeting in the Shadow of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 25–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107706477.002>.

<sup>19</sup> Stewart, *Governing for Revolution*.

<sup>20</sup> Stanton, “Strategies of Violence and Restraint.”

Stanton argues that insurgent democratic institutions incentivize restraint against targeting *their own* civilians, while a lack thereof permits greater levels of violence against civilians; this logic is inverted for democratic institutions in an enemy state. Stanton's argument centers on how the level of democracy in institutions creates different costs and benefits for violence and restraint against civilians, a critical component of insurgent strategy.<sup>21</sup>

Stewart focuses not on civilian targeting but on governance and, more broadly, the Maoist model of insurgency as her dependent variable. But Stewart's institutions are not about democratic accountability but how transformative the goals of an insurgent group are; the more transformative they are, the more likely they are to adopt a Maoist model of insurgency by which a social base (a critical resource for any insurgency) is founded via independent governing institutions. Stewart's argument centers on the idea that the Maoist model has become hegemonic over time due to its success and dissemination by Maoists and the Chinese Communist Party. Groups that understand their goals to be akin to the CCP in terms of transforming the social fabric see Maoist strategy as appropriate and effective. Insurgents accept costs associated with governing not because of the material benefits they provide, but because they view the Maoist model as the *appropriate* choice if their long-term goals are similarly transformative.<sup>22</sup>

Stewart does not note where long-term goals originate—it's outside her scope—but it's inherently likely they come from the internal political processes of an insurgent organization, whether by dictation of a singular founding leader or by deliberation amongst a leadership group. Goals necessarily impact strategy; if strategy is the imagined

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<sup>21</sup> Stanton. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart, *Governing for Revolution*. 15.

means to an end, then the end is a significant component of deciding the means. But strategy is iterative, and goals change in response to strategic interaction; they may be moderated, hardened, or radicalized depending on a variety of factors, most important among them the evolving strategic perceptions of the organization itself.

Biddle takes insurgent strategy on directly as his dependent variable, arguing it varies between Fabian (irregular/asymmetric warfare) and Napoleonic (conventional/symmetric warfare). This variation is driven by a combination of Stewart's transformative goals—conceptualized as “stakes”—and the “maturity” of political institutions, meaning their rational-legality as opposed their venality or personalization.<sup>23</sup> Biddle does not deny the importance of material conditions, but argues instead that modern material conditions have created an incentive for a “mid-range” strategy combining elements of Fabian and Napoleonic warfare. The ability of insurgent groups to undertake mid-range strategy depends on the institutional variables of stakes and institutional maturity.<sup>24</sup> The higher the stakes and the more mature the institutions, the more likely a group will be willing and able to make the large initial investment in training and operations that a mid-range strategy requires.

The critical distinction between Biddle and other institutionalists is that he views institutions as permissive of an ideal strategy while other institutionalists view them as constitutive of a group's strategic preferences. Biddle and Stewart have an interesting synergy in that they both argue for the hegemony of a mid-range strategy (as Maoist strategy can fairly be termed especially given the overlap between the two authors' cases) but differ on the reason for its hegemony: for Stewart it's a combination of diffusion,

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<sup>23</sup> Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias*.

<sup>24</sup> Biddle. 64.

exportation, and path dependency, while for Biddle it's simply the material environment as determined by modern military means.

Institutionalists are united more than anything by their critique and refinement of materialist and structuralist theories to include an accounting of how strategy is internally formulated by insurgent organizations rather than handed to them by the demands of extant conditions. Institutionalists address the formation of preferences in a way that undercuts a purely materialist or purely structuralist view—preferences are generated internally according to political processes rather than given by the environment. Institutionalists, however, do not have a dynamic view of the military environment's effect on preferences the way materialists and structuralists do, instead generally pointing to a single model as ideal and its performance limited or permitted by institutions. The question of how structure interacts with internal politics to produce strategy is left untouched.

*Culturalists: Strategy caused by national or ethnic culture*

The only other group of scholars to discuss the constitution of non-state strategic preferences are culturalists, who point towards essential cultural qualities as determining preferences.<sup>25</sup> Most often the explanatory cultural quality is *tribalism*, meaning social interactions are primarily within familial lines of descent producing tight social units with

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<sup>25</sup>Adda Bruemmer Bozeman, *Conflict in Africa: Concepts and Realities*, 2015. 208, 214.; Lawrence, T. E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1935.; Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). 13, 43–44, 114, 139, 252, 262.; Montgomery McFate, “The ‘Memory of War’: Tribes and the Legitimate Use of Force in Iraq,” in *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz (Newport, R.I. : Washington, D.C: Naval War College Press, 2008). 187–202.; Jeffrey White, “Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare,” *Studies in Intelligence* 39, no. 5 (1996), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA525282.pdf>; Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). 72–79.

high internal trust that dissipates rapidly beyond the immediate group.<sup>26</sup> Shultz and Dew put it best when describing the impact tribalist culture has on military strategy:

Traditional societies do not have standing professional armies in the Western sense. Rather, all men of age in a tribe, clan or communal group learn through societal norms and legacies to fight in specific ways.... these traditional concepts invariably take protracted, irregular, and unconventional forms of combat.<sup>27</sup>

Culture in this conception sees organizational strategic preferences as being determined by their socialization into a military tradition of irregular warfare. Organizations born out of tribalist cultures, then, should prefer terrorism and guerilla warfare over symmetrical insurgency, including the Maoist model. Moreover, it stands to reason given the primary mechanism is social trust that tribalist groups would also struggle to recruit or work alongside those outside their “tribe”.<sup>28</sup>

Culturalist accounts center frequently on Arab culture as tribalist, with focus on recent insurgencies in the Middle East—due in part to the concentration of insurgencies there.<sup>29</sup> However, these arguments are part of a broader Orientalist perspective that views Arabs as backwards and irrational with essential cultural qualities that bias them towards irregular warfare.<sup>30</sup> It’s undeniable that culture plays a role in the development of military strategy, but to say tribal culture plays a central causal role in strategic thinking denies Arab and other “tribalist” strategists the agency to do what many of them are proven to

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<sup>26</sup> Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias*. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Shultz and Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias*. 262.

<sup>28</sup> Tribe is used as a catch-all due to the term “tribalism” from Biddle (2021), not meant to intend that these kinds of social groupings are universally called “tribe”, when in fact many use terms as varied as family, clan, community, etc.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*; Shultz and Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias*; McFate, “The ‘Memory of War’: Tribes and the Legitimate Use of Force in Iraq.”

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York, NY, United States of America, 2019).

do consistently: read and learn from other culture's military practices.<sup>31</sup> It is also empirically false, as Arabs have pursued a vast array of strategies, including conventional warfare strategies. The Arab-Israeli wars, in particular the 1973 war between Egypt, Syria, and Israel, saw Arab states use conventional force in pitched battles to great effect.<sup>32</sup> Even Arab non-state militants have turned to more conventional strategy, as shown in the evolution of Hezbollah's tactics.<sup>33</sup> By locating the constitution of preferences via culture at the organizational rather than the national or ethnic level, this kind of essentialism can be avoided while retaining an argument that centers how organizations form their preferences under conditions of incomplete information.

### **Military Culture: Organizational or Strategic?**

Two separate but interwoven strains of literature on military strategy argue for the importance of culture; one terms itself "strategic" culture and the other "organizational" culture. Strategic culture came first, and the focus of debate was primarily whether the purpose of studying the relationship of culture and strategy was positivist comparison against a rationalist baseline or interpretivist description independent of a method to reject alternative explanations.<sup>34</sup> Both centered essentialism in their arguments: that a state's culture contains within it deeply rooted strategic ideas that are distinct from other states. Eventually the term strategic culture gave way to organizational culture, describing not a nationally-determined culture but one born out of the creation of military

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<sup>31</sup> Stewart, *Governing for Revolution*.

<sup>32</sup> M. Afaf, "The 1973 Arab—Israeli War," *Strategic Studies* 1, no. 3 (1977): 50–79.

<sup>33</sup> Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias*; Stewart, *Governing for Revolution*.

<sup>34</sup> Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 49–69; Alastair Iain Johnston, "Strategic Cultures Revisited: Reply to Colin Gray," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (1999): 519–23.

organizations in the state-building process.<sup>35</sup> The differentiation is less in content—what culture “does” for a military—and more in the level of analysis. Strategic culture arguments focus on the national culture of a given state and how that impacts its military’s strategic thinking.<sup>36</sup> Organizational culture, meanwhile, locates culture at the organizational level—meaning it’s possible for different militaries with shared cultural backgrounds to have varying cultures. This also reflects the ontological issues with the cultural approach to non-state militaries.

These concepts include most of the same content, effectively differing only on where precisely they locate culture. For state militaries, this is a minor problem since most states under study have deep historical roots and old militaries such that the organization is not fully separable from the nation-state in which it exists. When analyzing non-state militaries, this distinction becomes critical. If there is a strategic culture at the national level—not dissimilar from the culturalist accounts of strategy—then different militaries within the same national group should share culture. On the other hand, the organizational culture approach allows for variation among militaries of the same national group. Choosing between these nearly-identical concepts hinges on this question: is military culture nationally or organizationally determined? Empirically, insurgent military organizations within the same national group have great variation in

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<sup>35</sup> Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK*, Illustrated edition (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War* (Princeton University Press, 1997), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691653921/imagining-war>; Jeffrey W. Legro, “Culture and Preferences in the International Cooperation Two-Step,” *The American Political Science Review* 90, no. 1 (1996): 118–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082802>.

<sup>36</sup> Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel*. (Stanford, Calif, 2010); Gray, “Strategic Culture as Context”; Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking about Strategic Culture,” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995): 32–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119>; Jack L. Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture : Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations.,” December 31, 1976, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R2154.html>.

their cultures—often expressing wildly different or even opposing strategic ideas under similar conditions—making the organizational culture approach much more appropriate for non-state militaries.

Though operating with different concepts in different contexts, arguments about social movement strategy have much to say about the effects of culture on non-state military strategy. Contrary to the materialist concept of structure put forward by the scholars above, structural arguments about social movements center on the “political opportunity structure”, a combination of institutional openness and the number of independent nodes of power within the state.<sup>37</sup> Already, conceptual problems arise when applied to insurgent organizations, which do not rely on the institutional structure of states for making political claims. Critiques of the political opportunity structure approach offer a more useful approach to non-state strategy. Goodwin et. al. note, “There may be no such thing as objective political opportunities before or beneath interpretation—or at least none that matter; they are all interpreted through cultural filters.”<sup>38</sup> Though far from a holistic theory, this gives an important point for insurgencies: that the ability to identify, understand, or even conceptualize strategies or their feasibility is contingent upon an interpretation of information that necessarily is entangled in culturally given ideas about strategy. The cultural perception of information tied with the history of strategy transmitted forward in time has the bones of an explanation for insurgent strategy.

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Second Edition, Second Edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Jaswinder Khattri, “Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory,” *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (1999): 27–54.

Though there has not been a systematic argument about organizational culture's effect on insurgent strategy, numerous scholars have observed the preceding arguments and concluded that organizational culture has a notable effect on strategy. In the terrorism literature, even primarily rationalist scholars have called attention to the effects of organizational culture. Shapiro and Laitin note, for example, "if a leadership group plots a terrorist course, its organizational culture becomes set for future terrorist plans...", pulling from other authors who made this point with different terminology.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, and importantly for this dissertation, organizational culture has been cited as a cause of strategy specifically in the Palestinian case. Studying the Second Intifada, Bader and Araj argue, referring specifically here to organizational rather than national culture, "...the strategic actions we identified were largely a response to shifting political opportunities and cultural desiderata, not human agency."<sup>40</sup> In *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, one of the most critical texts on the history of the PLO, Yezid Sayigh notes that Fatah and the PFLP placed a low value on learning and a high value on improvisation due to their organizational cultures.<sup>41</sup> Even if there is not a pre-existing theory, clearly scholars of insurgent strategy and Palestine believe organizational culture is having some effect on non-state military strategy.

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<sup>39</sup> David D. Laitin and Jacob N. Shapiro, "The Political, Economic, and Organizational Sources of Terrorism," in *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Openness*, ed. Philip Keefer and Norman Loayza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 223. Ehud Sprinzak, "Chapter 5: The Psychopolitical Formation of Extreme Left Terrorism in a Democracy: The Case of the Weatherman," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 65–85; Michel Wieviorka, *The Making of Terrorism*, trans. David Gordon White (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 53-54.

<sup>40</sup> Bader Araj and Robert J. Brym, "Opportunity, Culture and Agency: Influences on Fatah and Hamas Strategic Action during the Second Intifada," *International Sociology* 25, no. 6 (November 1, 2010): 864.

<sup>41</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 679.

## Conclusion

Existing schools of thought on non-state strategy lack an explanation for strategic change and how strategic preferences are formed. Materialists, deriving insurgent strategy from their relative weakness, cannot explain observed variation in strategy that does not derive from relative power. Why did the Palestinians, for example, attempt to wage regular warfare against the materially superior Israelis in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon? Materialists lack an answer.

Structuralists focus on intra-insurgency competition and deriving strategy from the structure of relative power among insurgent groups. This more holistic approach explains effectiveness quite well, but also cannot explain the formation of strategic preferences, and cannot explain Palestinians using a regular warfare strategy against the Israelis any better than materialists—especially since this strategy featured significant inter-insurgent cooperation among the PLO's member organizations.

Institutionalists might explain the Palestinian choice to pursue regular warfare as being due to the maturity of their institutions: all militaries prefer a mid-range strategy of combined guerilla and regular warfare, but their ability to undertake such a task is determined by the ability of their political institutions to muster and leverage organizational capacity. But Palestinian political institutions at the time (centrally the PLO) were rife with corruption, mismanagement, and internal rivalries, perhaps explaining the strategy's failure if indeed it requires robust institutions. Nonetheless, this does not explain why they chose to pursue such a strategy, only its effectiveness.

Lastly, culturalists explain strategy on the basis of a broader national or ethnic culture, centering on the claim that Arabs particularly prefer irregular warfare. This fails

to explain the 1982 Israeli-Palestinian war worst of all: Palestinians chose regular warfare where guerilla tactics would have been superior, as shown by the success of Hezbollah's guerilla war against Israel in the following decades. If Arabs did have underlying preferences driving their behavior, 1982 would suggest they disfavored guerilla tactics instead.

Work on insurgent strategy and organizational culture belie a missing systematic examination of insurgent organizational culture. Often presented as a minor or secondary causal factor, it has been relegated to the sidelines while primarily rationalist theories take center stage. Only essentialist theories of culture have been used to systematically explain insurgent strategy, and these are insufficient and outdated. What is needed is what this dissertation provides: a theory of insurgent organizational culture that shows its independent and powerful effect on insurgent strategy and strategic change. Existing arguments frequently better serve to explain effectiveness (or just as often, lack thereof) and the strategies incentivized by structure rather than explaining the actual strategies pursued by non-state militants. This boils down to a question: if there is an ideal strategy for a particular context, why don't all organizations in this context pursue it? This dissertation relates to this extant literature on insurgent strategy in two ways: first, by shifting the focus of analysis to the dynamic formation of and differences between the underlying preferences of insurgent organizations, and second by adapting arguments about organizational culture in state militaries and businesses to suit non-state military organizations. Materialists and structuralists assume static preferences and a dynamic environment to examine the effect of the environment on behavior; institutionalists attempt to understand how internal organization is permissive of certain strategies.

Instead, I argue that political institutions are constituted by organizational culture, given form by the ideas, norms, and practices from which the organization is born and designed to tackle the problems and conflicts the organizational culture views as most important. Once formed, these institutions work alongside the diffusion of organizational culture to produce divergent reactions to similar environmental stimuli in otherwise similar organizations. This is how insurgent strategy is formed: iteratively and through the lens of their organizational cultures.

### **Theory of Insurgent Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture is the source of strategic preferences for insurgent organizations. Strategies are formed under uncertainty, and organizations gather what information they can to clear the fog of war; organizational culture determines how they gather it, prioritize it, and convert it into action. This process occurs at the constitutive level as insurgent organizations form an internal culture during their formative years. Their formation sets their organizational culture, which varies in its prioritization of information and its behavior under acute uncertainty. Some organizations prioritize the interests of their social constituencies; others prefer the fixedness of basing strategy on the competing interests of states and other insurgent organizations. Also, some insurgent organizations experiment when faced with an unclear path forward, while others double down on existing strategy. Strategy is iterative and understanding how it's formed requires understanding how it changes. Organizational culture is a powerful tool for explaining the patterns of strategic change in insurgent organizations.

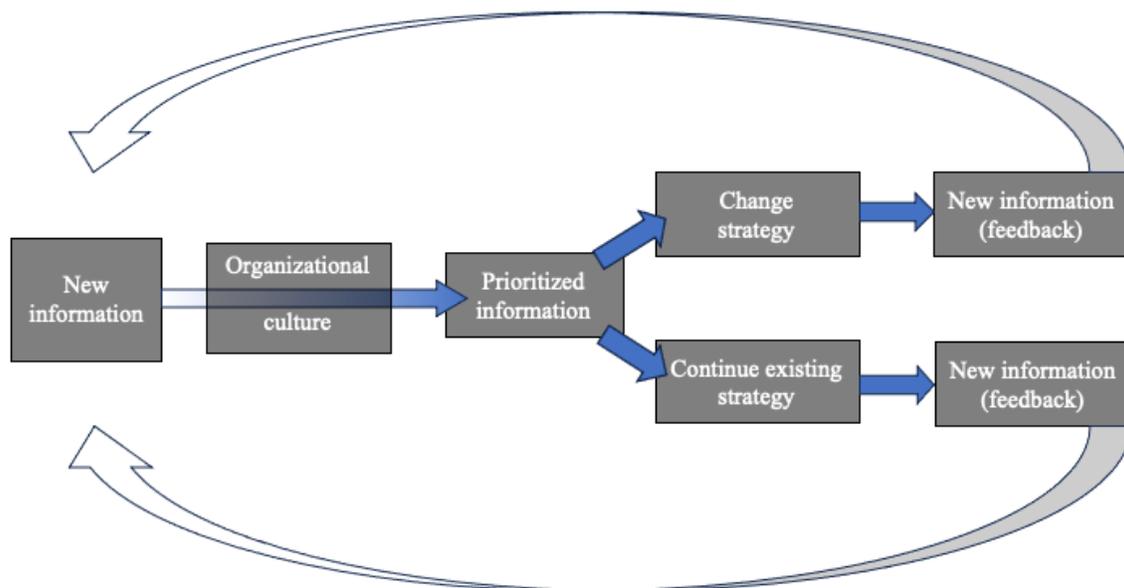
My organizational culture concept requires adjusting the claims and assumptions of the military organizational/strategic culture literature to better match the challenges of insurgency, primarily through combination and synthesis with the literature on the organizational cultures of private businesses. Three points about culture are central to this synthesis. First, culture needs to be measured by objectively ascertainable organizational qualities to avoid the tautology of measuring culture with the behavior it is theorized to be causing.<sup>1</sup> Second, organizational culture varies in its strength relative to the ambiguity

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston, "Strategic Cultures Revisited."

of information available. When information is unclear, culture is more impactful.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, and most importantly, what organizational culture is: it is a set of norms, ideas, and practices that set strategic preferences and repertoires for action. For non-state militaries, this is best conceptualized as how organizations interpret information and convert it into plans of action—respectively, their preferences and their repertoires.<sup>3</sup> The causal process of strategy, then, begins with information.

*Diagram 1: Theory of Insurgent Organizational Culture*



<sup>2</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture"; Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*; Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804366>; Araj and Brym, "Opportunity, Culture and Agency."

### *Strategic Information*

Information is critical to the success of any military, and as a result militant organizations invest heavily in collecting and analyzing strategic information. But information is not often objectively prescriptive or consistent. Multiple sources of information could point in conflicting directions or be subject to multiple interpretations. Organizational culture determines how militant organizations prioritize and interpret different sources of information.

There are many forms of useful information: recruitment numbers, intelligence reports, polling data, international support or opposition, state military attacks, insurgent military tactical effectiveness, among others. These all can provide critical knowledge about the state of the security environment, enemy strategy, and the effectiveness of insurgent strategy. For the purposes of this investigation, information can be categorized as one of three types: tactical, social and interorganizational.

Tactical information is given by the results of military engagement. Did we win the battle? Did the bomb go off? How much press did we get? Did the state capitulate to our demands? How did the state respond generally? The quality of tactical information varies widely between different strategies—a point I will return to later. Critically, strategy has a self-affirming bias—its use indicates there is a measure of belief the strategy will work, so any acts by the state that can be seen as conciliatory following an attack will be viewed as resulting from that attack.<sup>4</sup> Sunni militants may well have regarded the American withdrawal from Iraq as a vindication of their strategy, even if the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House Publishing Group, 2005).

decision was driven more by American domestic politics, because the result of American withdrawal matched the expected—or, at least, desired—outcome of their strategy.

Social information is produced by attempts to measure popular sentiment towards the organization and its strategy. Insurgents rely heavily on their constituent populations for support, recruitment, and potentially even votes. They will therefore be at least somewhat concerned with measuring how people feel about their strategies, with some extreme exceptions. Militant organizations measure popular support in a variety of ways, commonly through polling data, recruitment numbers, social connections, citizen non-military mobilization, or electoral outcomes. For example, one of the central reasons the RIRA gave up bombing was the Irish Catholic outcry in response to the Omagh Bombing.<sup>5</sup>

Interorganizational information is information about or given by other actors, except for the incumbent state. This can include peer insurgent organizations, foreign states, international institutions—any organization outside the specific insurgent-state dyad in question. Usually, this information is simply a communication of another organization's preferences, either through word or deed. Interorganizational information is distinct from social information in its subjectivity; the population has ephemeral and difficult to measure feelings on strategy, while other organizations generally have relatively fixed interests and goals. These can be more or less clearly understood or communicated, but the concern for this kind of information is radically different than the concern for social information. Hezbollah's entrance into legitimate electoral politics was driven by interorganizational information from its patron state of Iran and the parallel

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Cox, "Bringing in the 'International': The IRA Ceasefire and the End of the Cold War. (Irish Republican Army)," *International Affairs* 73, no. 4 (1997).

transition of peer competitors rather than by any pressure from its Shiite constituency to co-opt the Lebanese state.<sup>6</sup>

Information may also vary in its quality. Since organizational culture primarily functions to sort and interpret information, an environment of ambiguous information strengthens the effect of culture.<sup>7</sup> The clarity of information is difficult to measure; however, there are two useful heuristics for approximation. Firstly, direct or frequent conflict gives clearer information than indirect or sporadic conflict.<sup>8</sup> Direct, consistent conflict is rare and generally unfavorable for insurgents—they are most often operating in a murky information environment as a result, clarified in irregular bouts or campaigns. This is most true for tactical information, but direct conflict galvanizes and clarifies positions in a way campaigns of sporadic attacks cannot—more rapid action-reaction cycles make both civilian opinion and organizational interests crystallize and, often, homogenize.<sup>9</sup> Second, and correlated, is that different strategies provide different quality of information. Strategy dictates the “directness” of the conflict, so this makes good sense with regards to the first measure, but different strategies also give different *types* of information as well. Strategies targeting the state will generally give better interorganizational and tactical information, while strategies trying to influence civilians will give better social information. These factors constitute the information environment, or the approximate clarity of information at a given moment. A strong social information environment would see especially strong recruitment or consistent polling related to a

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<sup>6</sup> Krista E. Wiegand, “Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 8 (August 13, 2009): 669–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100903039320>.

<sup>7</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*. Pp. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Long; Thomas G. Mahnken, *Uncovering Ways of War: U.S. Intelligence and Foreign Military Innovation, 1918–1941*, 1st edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

new or newly successful strategy, whereas a weak environment for social information might be marked by an institutional, geographic, or social distance between the organization and its constituency. The goal is to reconstruct how insurgent organizations saw the world as they were seeing it—without the benefit of hindsight.

*Table 2: Types of Information*

<i>Type of information</i>			
	<b>Tactical</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Interorganizational</b>
<i>Where does it come from?</i>	Immediate effects of and responses to strategic actions	Recruitment, polls, public mood, democratic institutions, social connections	Formal or informal diplomatic statements, financial or military support, changes in international structure or alliances, politics of international institutions
<i>When is it strongest?</i>	Strongest during direct conflict	Strongest during crises, when there are deep institutional connections, and when there is consistent polling	Strongest when states have clear strategic interests and express them materially or through costly action, when international community or other insurgent organizations take unified position

In this model, the formation of strategy is like lighting a stage: the audience is the organization, trying to figure out what the play means, trying to plan a strategy. Information is the raw light—overwhelmingly bright, too much for an audience to handle at once. But with gels, filters, and a designer—the organizational culture—the light is processed into something manageable. How the audience feels about the play and its meaning can be powerfully determined by the light. The same scene can look different depending on how the light is designed. A gentle set of blues make for a somber setting,

while some reds may strike up romance. Information is filtered through organizational culture so organizations aren't blinded by overwhelming light, but instead presented a cohesive picture that they can interpret into strategy. I now turn to describing the gels and filters: what kinds of organizational cultures we can observe.

### *Organizational Culture Theory and Insurgent Strategy*

My conception of organizational culture is non-deterministic and dynamic; I do not assume a given preference for particular strategies but rather biases in the interpretation, prioritization, and conversion to action of strategic information. My focus on the information environment prevents divining abstract and static preferences from an organization's initial qualities or structural features. Preferences cannot be expressed in a vacuum—they can be observed only in relation to existing structures of opportunity. Maybe some groups that negotiate would have preferred to win through armed struggle, but events led iteratively to negotiation being the best strategic option; organizational culture determines how well militant organizations can see and seize those opportunities and formulates preferences within that structure.

Organizational culture determines how militant organizations prioritize and interpret these different sources of information. This model of organizational culture pulls from the literature on both business and military organizational cultures, since the challenges of non-state militaries reflect many of the same challenges of both, while containing critical differences.<sup>10</sup> Ideas in the business literature are better suited to

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel R. Denison and Aniel K. Mishra, "Organizational Culture and Organizational Effectiveness: A Theory and Some Preliminary Empirical Evidence.," *Academy of Management Proceedings* 1989, no. 1 (August 1989): 168–72, <https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.1989.4980714>; Long, *The Soul of Armies*; Kier, *Imagining War*.

describing the culture of insurgent organizations, since they lack the institutionalization, long history, and socialization processes of most state military organizations. As a result, state militaries are prone to conservatism in ways that most businesses and non-state militaries are not.<sup>11</sup> Businesses also better reflect the ways culture forms in insurgent organizations: like businesses, leadership is much more important for insurgents than the “first war”.<sup>12</sup> The first war concept functions for most state militaries because professionalization and training practices are established in the first war and persist thereafter; businesses and insurgent organizations do not have the internal bureaucratic and organizational power for this kind of regime, and instead generally rely on existing expertise, outside training, or hiring for expertise rather than producing their own systems of professionalization. State militaries do share common tasks with insurgent organizations in most ways, however. Accounting for this, the insurgent organization model for culture pulls from the state military literature in what culture actually *does*. That is, organizational culture is a way for organizations to sort and interpret complex and incomplete information as a precursor to planning and action.<sup>13</sup>

### *Source and Role of Organizational Culture*

Organizational culture in insurgent organizations is set by the founder or founders.<sup>14</sup> They establish ideas, practices, and institutions at the inception of an organization that then determine how their subordinates and future members will

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations*, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*; Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., The Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*; Johnston, “Thinking about Strategic Culture.”

<sup>14</sup> Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

prioritize and absorb information, and in turn underpin strategy and strategic change.<sup>15</sup> How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises emphasizes the beliefs and establishes repertoires of action; how leaders allocate resources reinforces priority structure and sets a status quo for resource distribution; and perhaps most importantly, how leaders select, reward or punish, and coach subordinates and peers reproduces their beliefs, ideas, and values across the organization.<sup>16</sup>

In this model, culture does not change. Though it may be possible in theory, the process is slow enough and the increments of change small enough that assuming no change is broadly accurate. This does not preclude the possibility of subcultures arising, which can form as factions or movements within an organization. Subcultures are not sustainable, however, as differences in organizational culture will lead to divergent strategies, which cannot exist within the same organization in perpetuity. This is one way groups can splinter or produce breakaway factions. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) splitting off from the IRA is such a case; a subculture formed around the idea of restarting an insurgency in Northern Ireland, and it was ultimately strategic disagreements rooted in the divergent subculture that caused the split. Importantly, this split did not develop around one instance of strategic choice, but years of slow division and repeated disagreements on the question of strategy culminating in the organizational split.<sup>17</sup>

The role of culture in insurgent organizations is distinct from both businesses and state militaries because the tasks and problems are distinct in each case. All three types of

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<sup>15</sup> Schein. 226.

<sup>16</sup> Schein. 246.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Sanders, *Inside the IRA: Dissident Republicans and the War for Legitimacy*, 1st edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

organization, however, must tackle the problem of attempting to accomplish goals in the face of uncertainty. But this uncertainty is much more acute in a military context such that in both state and insurgent militaries culture serves to organize and extract meaning from information.<sup>18</sup> If different organizational culture conceptions—for businesses versus state militaries, for example—are defined by their qualities and organizational role, then, its role in insurgent organizations is most like state militaries and its qualities more like businesses.

*Table 3: Roles, Qualities, and Sources of Types of Organizational Culture*

<i>Type of Culture</i>	<i>Role (problems culture resolves)</i>	<i>Qualities (How does culture vary)</i>	<i>Source of culture</i>
<b>State Military</b>	Sort and interpret sparse information, manage principal-agent problem, determine relationship with civilians	Nature of warfare, limits of war, hierarchical design, role of officers	Professionalization/first war
<b>Business</b>	Sort and interpret abundant information, identify non-economic purpose, structure management	Consistency, Mission, Inclusion (embeddedness), Reactivity	Founder(s)
<b>Non-state Military</b>	Sort and interpret sparse information, manage principal-agent problem, determine relationship with civilians	Embeddedness (inclusion), Reactivity, Consistency	Founder(s)

I adapt two qualities of organizational culture from the business literature to fit insurgent organizations; together, they constitute insurgent organizational culture.

*Reactivity* is the cultural preference for change, an organization's self-imagined

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<sup>18</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*; Kier, *Imagining War*; Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture."

“lightness on its feet”, so to speak. Critically, it is not a measure of the organization’s capacity for change but rather the cultural willingness to experiment under uncertainty. The second feature is *embeddedness*, analogizing an insurgent group’s constituents to its employees rather than consumers. This change reflects similar cultural qualities—the degree to which bottom-up information informs leadership choice—but better reflects the different social relationships that undergird insurgent organizations versus businesses. Both components of organizational culture are examined below in greater detail.

### *Embeddedness*

Embeddedness is the quality of an organization’s culture that guides how it prioritizes different sources of information, in particular when they are contradictory. Embedded or “anchored” groups highly value social information, concerning themselves centrally with how their constituent population views their strategy. Disembedded or “floating” organizations are more likely to value interorganizational information—privileging the clarity and fixedness of the interests of organizations and states rather than murky social information.

Embeddedness refers to the density of social connections between an insurgent organization and their constituent population. The level of embeddedness determines an insurgent organization’s ability and desire to access social information. This cultural quality is born from the political process of an insurgent military being born, such that it is set at inception and difficult or impossible to change thereafter. As stated, leadership plays a critical role in this, as the success of pre-war political mobilization determines embeddedness, and leaders’ strategies and capabilities determine the success of pre-war

political mobilization. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr's mobilization of Shiites in Iraq established the social base for the Mahdi Army and, later, the Peace Brigades, as well as other Shiite militias. This mobilization could not be undone, however, and became the basis for Shiite militant political action; thus, any action had to be undertaken in conjunction with the highly mobilized social base.<sup>19</sup>

Embeddedness is measured by the connectedness of an organization to pre-war political processes and institutions. From Sarbahi, this measure provides for degrees of embeddedness pulled from objectively identifiable qualities: origin in political party, pre-war support base, pre-war political mobilization, ties with societal actors, leadership structure, and the separation of political and military powers.<sup>20</sup> To be more precise,

A perfectly anchored rebel group would originate from a preexisting political party, which had a powerful political presence in the affected territory and undertook significant political mobilization of the catchment around the demands of the group for at least 2 years before the launch of rebellion. Post-rebellion such a rebel group has ties with important societal actors, a collective leadership, and distinct military and political wings with the political wing being the dominant.<sup>21</sup>

The opposite constitutes a perfectly floating group—a group founded by elites, opportunists, or foreign influence with little connection to the people they purport to represent. Embedded groups are more than accountable to their constituency as the satisfaction of the social base becomes a centerpiece of military strategy. Disembedded groups' disconnectedness does not mean they are unaccountable to a constituency, only that they prioritize information from organizations and interest groups with generally more legible goals and desires than a broader social or ethnic group. Fretilin was a

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<sup>19</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Sarbahi, "Insurgent-Population Ties and the Variation in the Trajectory of Peripheral Civil Wars."

<sup>21</sup> Sarbahi. pp. 1483.

disembedded group, and though they certainly represented the people of East Timor, they nonetheless took strategic cues not from below but from above. Their success was due in large part to their leader Xanana Gusmao's diplomatic outreach and international connections, fostered by a strategy of coercive negotiation. Fretilin even dropped their popular commitment to Marxism-Leninism to seek support from the Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup>

As noted above, anchored organizations prioritize social information, being rooted in a community and seeing itself as dependent on serving their goals and acting as a conduit for their political energies. Floating organizations, while not dismissive of social information and necessarily reliant on a social base, nonetheless prioritize interorganizational information. Both qualities are centered on where each organization locates their power: anchored organizations see their power in the grassroots and community-building, while floating organizations see their power as an interlocutor and representative undergirded by international legitimacy. These distinct cultural beliefs about the source and meaning of power can strongly determine how organizations convert new information into strategy.

Anchored groups, more tightly linked with their constituencies, are also more susceptible to emotional biases in information sorting and strategy formation. Individual action can be strongly influenced by emotional responses, and anchored organizations are more likely to carry these emotions upwards from constituency into strategy. Pearlman writes,

Emotions influence how people assess information... [which leads] individuals to focus on information relevant for or congruent with that appraisal and discount other information. [Emotional] stimuli that emphasize the value of dignity and that

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<sup>22</sup> Jacob Fortier, "East Timor: When State Repression Makes Secession Easier (1975-2002)," *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, no. 35 (April 2021): 18–36, <https://doi.org/10.24193/csq.35.2>.

trigger emotions such as anger, joy, pride, and shame...expand one's sense of identity, and heighten attention to slights to that identity. They also promote optimistic assessments, a sense of personal efficacy, and risk acceptance. Such emotions increase an individual's likelihood of political resistance, even if it jeopardizes security.<sup>23</sup>

Anchored organizations can capture these emotional impetuses for political action because of their deeper social connections to the community; floating organizations are far less able to do so, both because of their limited ability to perceive emotional motivations and their low prioritization of social information even when they can perceive it. This is not emotionally irrational action on the part of anchored organizations, but rather a rational organizational response to the emotionally-informed beliefs and preferences of their constituency.

Measuring embeddedness begins with leadership structure. Floating groups tend towards individual and personalized leadership, while anchored organizations are more likely to have a collective leadership, usually a council or an internally elected committee. These structures may exist without embodying any actual power, however; a real collective leadership requires not only formal cooperative structures at the top of the organization, but their actualization in policy. It cannot be a collective leadership if one person in a nominally collective leadership is able to exercise *de facto* control. Control over finances speaks best to where power in an organization lies. A leadership is collective insofar as this control is held by a formal body rather than individuals, and the existence of meaningful and useable veto points.

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<sup>23</sup> Wendy Pearlman, "Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2 (June 2013): 391–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713001072>.

The second measure of embeddedness is the nature of pre-war political mobilization. Organizational formation requires a mobilization of resources, especially human resources. Floating groups tackle this task most often by approaching nodes of independent power and wealth to create a network of support for inclement military action. Anchored organizations, on the other hand, tend to develop from longer processes of political mobilization, birthed out of social movements or political parties that centered grassroots organizing and broader proselytization of the public. This difference is most obvious in how public-facing the pre-war mobilization is; anchored groups are more likely to emerge from public-facing campaigns while floating groups are born from underground, private networks of mobilization.

Third, anchored groups generally have a political wing that is dominant over the military wing, while floating groups have a singular organization with joint military and political control. An independent political wing points to an extra-military interest in engaging with a constituency and pursuing political goals on their behalf. Organizations without independent political wings are not necessarily disinterested in politically engaging their constituency, but the unity of the organization generally means broader political goals are sublimated to organizational prerogatives, which will generally center military threat. This is not to say floating organizations are more militaristic. In fact, a political wing may be more desirous of antagonistic military action than a military wing if the military wing wants to avoid a militarily disastrous confrontation while the political constituency pushes for conflict. Political-military separation is a key feature of culturally anchored militant organizations.

Lastly, embeddedness is measured by ties with societal actors. Most militant organizations form at least some connections with civil society, but not to the same degree. Anchored organizations will have deep connections with civil society and may even fund their own civil society institutions. Floating groups are more likely to have only surface-level connections with civil society. These connections can be measured by assessing the degree to which an organization is able to muster support from civil society, how organic and non-coercive their connections are, and the degree to which the organization's popularity is expressed within the civil society institution itself. The process of pre-war political development determines a group's embeddedness, but the remainder of a group's organizational culture—reactivity—comes after this process is complete, as the organization is designed and constructed.

### *Reactivity*

Reactivity describes an organization's cultural disposition towards change. Reactive or "dynamic" organizations are willing and able to change, but more importantly, prefer to change strategy when information is ambiguous or contradictory. Conversely, unreactive or "static" organizations generally prefer to stay the course in weak information environments, valuing past success highly. This is a cultural quality, not an organizational one: a preference absent certainty or clarity, rather than a firm policy of action or capability. Static organizations can change strategy and may do so often, while dynamic organizations may change strategy only rarely. Organizations respond to information, and there may be clear information that the current strategy is working or not working that override any cultural preferences towards change. Again, the

effect of culture is stronger the more ambiguous the information environment is.<sup>24</sup>

Reactivity must be measured without reference to behavior. Instead, I measure reactivity instrumentally through objectively ascertainable qualities that are both independent of strategy and indicative of an organization's cultural attitudes towards strategic change.

There are three organizational qualities I use to measure reactivity: organizational structure, investment in ideology, and the fungibility of initial capabilities. An organization's reactivity is determined when a leader sets their vision for victory. Leaders taking a long-term view will have lower reactivity, seeing tactical failures and strategic problems as temporary setbacks on a longer path to victory. Leaders with a short-term view, on the other hand, will be more likely to experiment with new strategies and approaches. New approaches, to be clear, count as change—change can occur within strategies as organizations shift their focus or tactics iteratively. Hezbollah's insurgency strategy shifted from human wave attacks to guerilla warfare between the 1980s and 1990s, not denoting a change in strategy, but certainly a change nonetheless.<sup>25</sup> These initial views determine how a leader structures their organization and in which kinds of capabilities they invest.

Reactivity is measured first by organizational structure. Dynamic organizations will prefer to be highly centralized such that the organization can be pulled in different directions quickly and without resistance from below. This is a costly preference—managing a centralized organization requires accepting significant security risks—and thereby a good measure of an organization's willingness or expectation for strategic

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<sup>24</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*.

<sup>25</sup> Marc R. DeVore and Armin B. Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness: Internal and External Determinants of the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 2 (March 15, 2015): 331–57.

change.<sup>26</sup> Static organizations, expecting stagnant strategy, will be more concerned with preserving operational security through decentralization than controlling every agent's actions. Military failures and security pressure could have led the LTTE, for example, to go underground and decentralize control to better avoid the Sri Lankan state. Instead, they shifted to a strategy of negotiation, preserving their centralized structure and in so doing the possibility of a future return to insurgency.<sup>27</sup>

The second measure for reactivity is investment in ideology. An investment in ideology—broadly, training cadres in politics as well as fighting and putting money and organizational power towards non-military ideological goals—suggests a more static organizational culture. Investment in ideology is measured by the depth of ideological training for fighters, the toleration of divergent ideologies within the organization, and the degree of enforcement of ideological rules or strictures in the rank-and-file. Ideological investment limits the scope of action first and foremost because it creates independent nodes of thought in each fighter. Ideological training is not brainwashing; on the contrary, ideological rank-and-file members can drive bottom-up pushback on strategic change if the change is perceived to be against stated ideology.<sup>28</sup> Ideology can change over time, but culture does not; so what counts as acceptable action within the ideology may evolve, the cultural attitude towards strategic change persists. Moreover, spending organizational resources and training man-hours on ideology means at some level there is strong faith in the ideology at the top, which regardless of the ideology

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<sup>26</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, Reprint edition (Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Zachariah Cheria Mampilly, "The Two Faces of the Tiger: Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," in *Rebel Rulers*, 1st ed., Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War (Cornell University Press, 2011), 93–128, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7zfvj.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7zfvj.9).

<sup>28</sup> Vera Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

makes for a more static organization. A belief in practical action per se over ideology is what drives a culture of dynamism; investment in ideology creates a more static culture as ideological justification for a specific strategy increases the intra-organizational social costs to changing strategy.

Finally, reactivity is in part measured by the initial capabilities in which organizations invest. Capabilities vary in their fungibility and require an investment; this investment indicates an organization's view towards future strategic change. Small arms can be used for firefights, intimidation, hijacking, kidnapping, leverage, security, among other things. Bombs and missiles, on the other hand, only really have one use. A greater investment in single-use capabilities signifies an organization is relatively unconcerned with the possibility of radical and persistent strategic change. Of course, *not* investing in single use capabilities is not necessarily a sign of reactivity; the fungibility of capabilities is only a useful measure when there is low fungibility. Training regimens are also an investment in capability and vary in fungibility: general military training has a variety of useful application while training targeted for specific kinds of missions or tactics is more limited and indicates a more static strategic thinking.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) experience taking the Yemeni city of Mukalla is a case in point. Trained for terrorism and famed for international action such as the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris, AQAP was only able to capture Mukalla because the local military forces surrendered and abandoned the city with little resistance. Had they fought back, AQAP would likely have been outmanned, outgunned, and more importantly, unable to organize an effective conventional military response. Their exit from the city was similarly uneventful—a negotiated withdrawal without so

much as a shot fired. AQAP continues to center its strategy on terrorism because they are constitutively static. They were equipped, trained, and organizationally built for terrorism, which reinforced an organizational distaste for other strategies and bolstered faith in strategies that had previously seen success.

### *Strategic change and strategic inertia*

When faced with new information, militant groups have two choices. First, they can persist in their strategy, either internalizing positive information about their strategy or ignoring negative information. Second, they can change approach, seeing new information as contradicting previous ideas. Given contradictory or unclear information, change depends on the reactivity of a group. Long periods of unclear information can combine with low reactivity to produce strategic inertia. Strategic inertia itself can have a self-reinforcing effect, in which the continued practice of a strategy continuously supports the belief in its efficacy given a lack of clear information about its efficacy. Low reactivity organizations will generally continue their existing strategy when information is unclear or return to oft-used strategies in the past. High reactivity organizations are the opposite: under conditions of weak information, they will try new things. This can mean new strategies, new approaches to old strategies, or seeking out new capabilities. But there is a relationship to embeddedness as well, one not as easily observed. A popular base activated by a particular strategy may attach its identity to that strategy, making failure difficult for anchored groups to admit. No military organization likes to admit defeat or mistakes. But anchored groups, in taking a long-term view, may produce a long-term attachment to a particular strategy or strategies that constitutively precludes calling

the strategy a failure. This is not irrational, but rather, a redefining of strategic failure and success: if the base finds it appealing on an ongoing basis, that in and of itself can be fairly regarded as success.

Tactical information can also be a powerful source of inertia as tactically successful strategies produce positive feedback without necessarily generating broader strategic or organizational goods. On the other hand, tactical failure does not strongly push for strategic change since it's entirely logical to believe that a tactical failure is an isolated incident, a result of poor execution, or due to extraneous factors the group can't control. Tactical success, then, is a stronger force for inertia than tactical failure is for change. In fact, tactical failure rarely results in strategic change. Betts notes that military organizations frequently select out information that suits their existing repertoire, producing "goal displacement", wherein the means for achieving political ends become the ends themselves.<sup>29</sup> This is even more likely in contexts of ambiguous information, when insurgent organizations' subjective interpretations of strategic information have more effect.

### **Insurgent Organizational Culture Typology**

These two qualities of embeddedness and reactivity combine into a matrix of four ideal-types of insurgent organizational culture. Each will be addressed in turn, with the knowledge that they do not perfectly represent any group, instead reflecting general organizational tendencies and systems of strategic belief.

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<sup>29</sup> Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 5–50.

Figure 1: Typology of Insurgent Organizational Cultures

		<i>Embeddedness</i>	
		<b>Anchored</b>	<b>Floating</b>
<i>Reactivity</i>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<i>Responder</i>	<i>Reasonablist</i>
	<b>Static</b>	<i>Resister</i>	<i>Representative</i>

Responders are dynamic and anchored. The term responders is rooted in this kind of group's penchant for competition and letting competitive dynamics drive strategy. They are rooted and beholden to their people, which makes them attentive to the changing strategic desires and beliefs of the average co-ethnic civilian, rank-and-file member, and/or ideological supporter. Therefore, they compete actively to be seen as the group most in line with popular belief. Their embeddedness attunes them to popular opinion while their dynamism allows them to change strategy quickly to match it. Responders outside of a competitive context—that is, in the role of hegemon<sup>30</sup>—are likely to behave similarly to resisters, lacking a counterpart against which to measure its strategy, though likely to be somewhat more strategically deft. The Kurdish PUK in Iraq are a great example of responders, following the popular mood supporting the uprisings across Iraq and later seeking to undermine the rival KDP's negotiations with Saddam Hussein in the early 90s.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Krause, "The Structure of Success."

<sup>31</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 2 (1996): 224-41.

Reasonablists, on the other hand, see themselves as the ultimate pragmatists. Everything—relationships, ideology, popular support—is instrumental in the pursuit of victory. They highly value knowing the political positions of friends and foes alike, targeting strategy to navigate their perception of exogenous conditions. This perception, however, is treated as objective and indisputable analysis; popular resistance and public opinion is secondary to what reasonablist organizations view as necessary. These groups frequently position themselves as international interlocutors and focus heavily on international relations, not only because they are floating and thereby more interested in inter-organizational information, but also because their dynamism allows for quick strategic change in response to this information.

The Bolshevik Party is the quintessential reasonablist organization. Born out of the émigré community of Russians exiled in the 1905 revolution, the Bolsheviks never developed a concrete base in either the proletariat or the peasantry. Their main source of support was in the military—a crucial hinge-point for taking power, but not generally in touch with the popular mood. Bolshevism was marked by its internationalism, distinguishing it from nearly all other Marxist groups in Russia at the time by maintaining support for internationalism after World War I began. Lenin’s entire military strategy was premised on a revolution in Germany that never came; but Bolshevism under Lenin was by no means dogmatic or puritanical, as shown by Lenin’s response when Bolsheviks were offered support from the Allied forces: “Please include my vote in favor of procuring potatoes and arms from the bandits of Anglo-French imperialism.”<sup>32</sup> Faced with incredible uncertainty in the Russian Civil War and the inter-revolutionary period of

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<sup>32</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 44, 45 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975).

1917, the Bolsheviks were happy to forgo previous ideological stances where it suited them. For example, after the October Revolution, they stole wholesale the Socialist-Revolutionary Party's political program for the peasantry, only to abandon it for market reforms when such a plan was no longer advantageous.<sup>33</sup>

Resisters take a long-term view of strategy, taking the idea of popular resistance seriously as a strategic value. Public support and following public opinion become itself a strategic end, intertwined with military success. Their strategic stoicism is not irrational; it recognizes the irreconcilability of popular resistance and unilateral action, preferring to serve and maintain a social base as an eventual means to victory rather than achieving more limited goals in the near-term. They contrast with responders, who seek popular approval relative to other groups and follow public opinion on this short-term basis. Resisters long-termism does not make them immune to competitive dynamics, but they seek to sway public opinion as much as they seek to follow it when competing. Hezbollah is a resister organization *par excellence*, deeply rooted in the Shia community of South Lebanon and equally attached to armed resistance as its strategy for decades. Their combination of military and religious-ideological training as well as their generous patronage network paints a picture of a group not merely trying to follow its base but actively shape it.

Representatives are the rarest type. A group with neither roots in a social base or dynamic strategy is unlikely to survive or succeed. The exception is groups that represent a particular interest, and this interest is frequently a state sponsor, hence the name

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth: An Anarchist's Eyewitness Account of the Betrayal and Failure of the Russian Communist Revolution* (Red and Black Publishers, 2014); Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 4th ed. (Vintage, 1995).

representative. Their strategic outlook is static in that it reflects the natural conservatism of a state in the international system; they are limited to action that serves the strategic interest of their patron. Lacking a meaningful social base, they rely nearly entirely on the preferences and outlook of their sponsor for information. The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia were such an organization: a paramilitary with deep connections to the official state military as well as wealthy landed interests in Colombia, mostly serving the interests of their U.S. patrons.<sup>34</sup>

### **Typology of Insurgent Strategies: Targets and Tactics**

Theories of insurgent strategy, despite their differences in causal explanation, share some critical qualities that help to define the challenges and dynamics of non-state military strategy. The lack of institutional legitimacy and sovereignty means that strategy has a much deeper and direct connection to a social base than state militaries, and therefore legitimacy must be strategically constructed both in the international sphere and in the militant group's constituency. Non-state strategy, then, includes qualities of social movement building inseparable from military goals, including strategies that reflect the concept of contentious performances.<sup>35</sup> As Brazilian insurgent strategist Marighela noted, "It is only through revolutionary action that an organization capable of carrying the revolution through to victory can be formed."<sup>36</sup> Building the strength of the organization is critical for military success, and military success is critical for building the organization. Therefore, insurgent strategy has both material and semiotic objectives; to

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<sup>34</sup> Victoria Sanford, "Learning to Kill by Proxy: Colombian Paramilitaries and the Legacy of Central American Death Squads, Contras, and Civil Patrols," *Social Justice* 30, no. 3 (93) (2003): 63–81.

<sup>35</sup> Tilly, *Contentious Performances*.

<sup>36</sup> Carlos Marighela, *For the Liberation of Brazil* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1974).

both achieve tactical goals within the direct military conflict and to project an image of victory and strength that will attract recruits and funding. This is the fundamental—and often contradictory—challenge of insurgent strategy. How can a relatively weak military strengthen itself through victory? The multitude of answers to this question are contingent on constantly shifting relative power, public opinion, and organizational structure.

Insurgent strategies are answers to this question: they attempt to both construct an organization through performance and secure material gains in combat towards the final strategic objective. An analysis of strategy requires some objective way to describe and differentiate them. Delineating strategy is difficult, as all strategy can have both a material and symbolic purpose without necessarily valuing one over the other—in fact, they most frequently go hand-in-hand. Drawing from Stanton,<sup>37</sup> a better way to distinguish strategies from one another is their choice of target—civilian or the government. This is objectively ascertainable and tactically distinct. The other vector along which I measure strategy, again borrowing but now from Cunningham,<sup>38</sup> is whether a strategy is violent or non-violent. Though the focus here is on non-state military strategy, I've said previously mid-range organizational goals are not fully distinguishable from long-term strategic goals, and, again with thanks to Cunningham,<sup>39</sup> a more holistic conception of military strategy more accurately describes the military thinking of non-state strategists.

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<sup>37</sup> Stanton, "Strategies of Violence and Restraint."

<sup>38</sup> Cunningham, "Understanding Strategic Choice."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

The two vectors of violence and target give a matrix of four potential ideal-typical strategies: insurgency, negotiation, terrorism, and civil resistance. All the strategies represent plans for victory, independent of the political objective they serve, and including a wide package of potential tactics, e.g., civil resistance could include boycotts, protests, strikes, sit-ins, among many other means of pursuing the broader “plan”. These strategies are mutually exclusive ideal-types—a given campaign or a single attack cannot be multiple strategies in this conception. However, multiple campaigns can occur at the same time, and can often be used in conjunction to reinforce or as prelude to another strategy. For example, the LTTE’s use of terrorism outside of their territory was intended to cause distress behind the Sri Lankan lines that would support their central strategy of insurgency; after negotiations began to sour, the LTTE’s slow-rolling and eventual withdrawal was alleged, justifiably, to be purely instrumental as they rebuilt capability for a continued insurgency.<sup>40</sup> The FLN’s insurgency and terrorism were pressure campaigns for an eventual negotiation with France for withdrawal.

These strategies are also iterative and multifaceted; it is a set of beliefs about future possibilities actualized only at the moment of decision and in conjunction with a fluid structure. The best predictor of a given strategy is what preceded it, not just because of limited repertoires, but because strategies determine investments in capabilities and change the social and military environment in ways that deeply impact future possibilities. The Weather Underground’s abortive insurgency could not have been conceived of if not for the failure of its constituent members’ attempts at civil disobedience, for example. Additionally, tracking strategy iteratively is critical because

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<sup>40</sup> Sumit Ganguly, “Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 85.

most insurgencies do not begin with a fully constructed organization with a fleshed-out plan of action. Instead, as Brazilian insurgent strategist Carlos Marighela notes, “What made us grow was action: solely and exclusively revolutionary action,” because “...it is only through revolutionary action that an organization capable of carrying the revolution through to victory can be formed.”<sup>41</sup>

*Figure 2: Typology of Insurgent Strategies*

		<i>Target</i>	
		<b>Government</b>	<b>Civilian</b>
<i>Means</i>	<b>Violent</b>	<i>Insurgency</i>	<i>Terrorism</i>
	<b>Non-violent</b>	<i>Negotiation</i>	<i>Civil Resistance</i>

### *Terrorism*

Influencing civilians using violence is termed “terrorism”.<sup>42</sup> The specific plan for how this accomplishes an organization’s goals is rooted in the one of the origins of terrorism, the “propaganda of the deed”—a strategy undertaken by 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchists to overthrow capitalism by using violence as spectacle to inspire popular sympathy and, eventually, revolution.<sup>43</sup> The hopes of modern terrorism are not so high. Instead, now terrorism is used to rally supporters to the cause of the organization, galvanize moderates to a more extreme position, make other organizations seem weak, and terrify enemy

<sup>41</sup> Marighela, *For the Liberation of Brazil*. 30, 31.

<sup>42</sup> For more on the definition of terrorism, see also: Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421717>; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Revised & Enlarged edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

civilians. This, in theory, leads to concessions by the state—but terrorism may simply be intended to prolong rather than resolve a conflict in the hopes that conditions in the future are riper for directly attacking the state. Terrorism is also often used for more mid-range organizational goals, inciting a radicalizing response from the state, or attracting new supporters or recruits.<sup>44</sup>

Terrorism has an inertia bias. It's been shown to strengthen group bonds,<sup>45</sup> to establish a cultural preference for future terrorism,<sup>46</sup> and to suffer from confirmation bias.<sup>47</sup> Terrorism has this tendency to perpetuate itself because of the ambiguity of information it gives, the internal strengthening of social bonds within the organization, and most importantly, the perceived efficacy of terrorism due to the difficulty of perceiving terrorism's efficacy. Terrorism has poor tactical feedback—it requires little to no interaction with the enemy, and state response will almost always be harsh such that strategic efficacy is difficult to obtain in the short term. Its continuation or end, then, relies on the collection and interpretation of social and interorganizational information. A good example of these dynamics is the bombing campaign undertaken by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) roughly between 2003 and 2007. AQI's intention was to foment a religious conflict between Sunni and Shia Iraqis by attacking Shiite holy sites and religious leaders, which would also weaken the position of the American occupation, who in the

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49–80.

<sup>45</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 1st Edition edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 78–105.

<sup>46</sup> Sprinzak, "Chapter 5"; David D. Laitin and Jacob N. Shapiro, "The Political, Economic, and Organizational Sources of Terrorism," *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Openness*, February 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511754388.008>.

<sup>47</sup> Pape, *Dying to Win*.

AQI formulation relied on Shiites as their local enforcers.<sup>48</sup> They achieved their immediate goals, as indeed the bombings sparked new violent Sunni-Shia conflict, and thus AQI saw their strategy as successful. But this terrorism campaign ended up turning Sunni tribal leaders, their natural allies originally opposed to the U.S. invasion, against them. AQI continued to use terrorism nonetheless and did not adjust its strategy even as it absorbed significant losses in personnel, leaders, material, and territory to the newly American-aligned Sunni locals.<sup>49</sup>

### *Civil Resistance*

Targeting the civilian population non-violently is “civil resistance”, a broad term for non-violent campaigns of strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and protests, among other tactics.<sup>50</sup> Civil resistance is similar to terrorism in its goal is to politically activate and collectively mobilize the civilian population. The problem here is twofold. First, strategy is integral to mobilization. Civilians will not mobilize on behalf of a group whose strategy they oppose or don’t believe in. Second, the difficulty of mobilization is as much a perceptual variable as a material one; insurgent beliefs and ideas determine what they think the best way to mobilize the population is. Many groups believe that using violence is the best way to mobilize the population via the logic of propaganda of the deed. The importance of perception extends to strategic choice. If deciding between violent and

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<sup>48</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Al Qaeda Strikes Back,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 3 (2007): 24–40; Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, “Zarqawi Letter,” February 12, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Najim Abed Al-Jabouri and Sterling Jensen, “The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening,” *PRISM* 2, no. 1 (2010): 3–18.

<sup>50</sup> For more on how civil resistance functions, see also: Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012).; Sharp, Gene. “The Meanings of Non-Violence: A Typology (Revised).” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 1 (1959): 41–66.

non-violent strategies depends on which strategy militants believe will work, then insurgent ideas and beliefs are a critical variable. A strategy of civil resistance, then, requires a belief in the efficacy of non-violence.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike terrorism, however, the capabilities undergirding civil resistance are fungible—civil society organizations are frequently used as legitimate organs of military organizations, and civilian mobilization can be used to support the sustenance of violent strategies. Civil resistance does not have the same bias towards repetition found in terrorism; it gives moderate tactical feedback because it often engenders direct interaction with enemy institutions, requires a deeper investment in civil society that opens channels of critique, and its effectiveness is generally self-evident in the number of people mobilized and the harshness of state response. Nonetheless, civil resistance may say little about a *particular* organization's strength or popularity if multiple groups support a civil resistance movement, thereby potentially giving unearned positive feedback. Civil resistance gives the best social information, though generally poor interorganizational information due to the necessity of large-scale unified mobilization. The Lebanese National Movement (LNM) is a good case of civil resistance's information. The LNM was a leftist umbrella organization, formally created only after the war began. But before their formal creation, its constituent organizations participated in a social movement combining worker's rights and religious minority rights. Their protests clearly showed the social power these organizations could collectively wield, but many of these organizations realized their relative weakness later when political lines became increasingly sectarian: the secular leftist organizations, formerly thinking themselves far

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<sup>51</sup> Gene Sharp, "The Meanings of Non-Violence: A Typology (Revised)," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 1 (1959): 53.

stronger than their rightist opponents, lost many of their Shia supporters to explicitly Shiite groups and Palestinian supporters to Palestinian nationalist organizations.<sup>52</sup>

### *Negotiation*

Non-violently targeting the state is “negotiation”. This entails applying leverage or bargaining power against the state to extract concessions or force the state to meet insurgent demands. States do not generally give concessions or capitulate completely without pressure. Terrorism, insurgency, or civil resistance may generate this pressure. But negotiation is difficult. Most negotiations drag on without ever reaching an agreement.<sup>53</sup> However, it’s difficult to measure the real success rate of negotiation as a strategy because of its near-ubiquitous use as a tactic. It can frequently be useful, for either insurgents or the state, to enter into negotiations with no intention of making a deal simply to delay fighting to rebuild, prepare, or otherwise bolster their true strategy.<sup>54</sup> Even so, negotiation is a delicate dance. Even when an insurgent organization plans to negotiate, the state may not be so willing; it depends in large part on how much of a threat the insurgency poses. Bapat points to windows of opportunity for negotiations when the insurgency is strong enough for the state to legitimize it by agreeing to negotiate, but not so strong it feels it can defeat the state without negotiating. The flawed presumption in this model is that the state’s and the insurgent organizations’ willingness to negotiate is determined by their relative capabilities. But some organizations may be

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<sup>52</sup> Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, First edition (University of California Press, 1990); Walid Shuqair and Kamal Jumblatt, “Kamal Jumblatt: Lebanon’s Future,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 56 (1977): 18–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011813>.

<sup>53</sup> Martha Crenshaw, *How Terrorism Ends* (Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691152394/how-terrorism-ends>.

<sup>54</sup> Zambrano and Zuleta, “Goal and Strategies of an Insurgent Group.”

keener to negotiate than others regardless of their ability to win an insurgency; some may not consider negotiation a valid option at all.

Negotiation depends upon both sides believing to some degree that the other is an honest negotiating partner. That belief may not even be possible for some groups. As Crenshaw notes, “without violence, some feel they have no voice.”<sup>55</sup> Some groups—including the state—may feel they have no interest in a conflict ending. Successful negotiation depends most upon the beliefs of an organization in the potential for negotiation. This includes the whole organization, as leaders must account for the beliefs of the rank-and-file lest they desert; deserting is generally a much easier task for insurgents than soldiers in state militaries.<sup>56</sup> This dynamic is supported by studies finding that negotiation is far more likely when leaders are selected by consensus rather than compromise—without a mandate, negotiation is nearly impossible.<sup>57</sup> Negotiation gives the best tactical feedback possible; it requires by its nature learning directly from the enemy what they want and what they will accept. It also gives strong interorganizational information, as enemy and allied organizations will be forced to take stances on the negotiations and their preferred outcomes. Social information, on the other hand, is extremely ambiguous—it is nearly impossible to differentiate hopes for peace or war-weariness from genuine political support. Support for the Bolsheviks ran incredibly high in late 1917 and early 1918 due to their singular anti-war stance, but as evidenced by later resistance, this support was absolutely not an endorsement of their political program.

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<sup>55</sup> Crenshaw, *How Terrorism Ends*.

<sup>56</sup> Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, 1st edition (New York: Ecco, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Katherine Sawyer, “Conflict Negotiations and Rebel Leader Selection,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (April 2019): 619–34.

### *Insurgency*

Lastly, using violence against the state is “insurgency”. The logic of insurgency is the simplest; attack military targets until the state’s capacity for violence is eliminated or the state capitulates to insurgent demands. The difficulty of insurgency is its high costs as well as the necessity of strong military capabilities that many non-state militants lack. Frequently, terrorism or civil resistance may precede insurgency as a way of ramping up support and recruitment until a critical mass is reached such that conventional attacks on the state military become possible.

The specific plan of insurgency varies but must be carefully differentiated from terrorism as a strategy. The critical distinction is the target intended for influence, not just the target of violence. Insurgency seeks to stack unacceptable costs on the state with violence or violently overthrow and supplant the ruling government. This violence can include violence against civilians, but intention matters: if the goal is to reduce state capacity or impose political costs, this falls under insurgency. Terrorism, on the other hand, seeks to convince civilians of a group’s strength, willingness to escalate violence (especially vis-a-vis other groups), or the intractability of the conflict. This has a positive effect for a group’s constituent civilians, fostering recruitment and other forms of support, while terrorizing enemy civilians and upending quotidian life. The important distinction is the primary target of influence. A group may terrorize civilians to influence their feelings on the conflict which, especially in democracies, pressures the state—but influencing the state in this scenario is second-order influence. This differentiation also only holds at the strategic level, where intentions and plans are the key definitional factor; at the tactical level, who is actually attacked decides the distinction. This is a fine

line, but an important one. Insurgency intends an absolute victory over the state, while terrorism primarily seeks to change minds.

Territorial control is a central feature of the strategy of insurgency. The formation of a military large enough to take on a state military requires space for training, for safe recruitment, and especially for a headquarters in which simple organizational tasks can be undertaken safely.<sup>58</sup> De la Calle et. al. find that territorial control is strongly associated with directly confronting the enemy, as opposed to groups unable to control territory who remain underground and rely on bombings.<sup>59</sup> This is in many ways a way to measure group strength as the central determinant of tactics: weak groups use bombs, strong groups capture territory and undertake direct insurgency. Insurgency gives excellent tactical feedback because it directly engages the enemy, giving clear information about relative strength and political will. Interorganizational information, similarly to civil resistance, is more difficult to ascertain due to the general necessity of insurgent cooperation and larger mobilization for an insurgency strategy. Social information, by the same token, is relatively strong as military mobilization efforts can be easily measured. The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was able to recognize and absorb popular support as its strategy of insurgency awakened and activated strong political support for Kashmiri independence, though they were unable to convert this popularity into military success.<sup>60</sup> Also, attacking the military directly is a strategy broadly recognized as legitimate, which makes support or opposition for the insurgency easier to discern

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<sup>58</sup> Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*.

<sup>59</sup> Luis de la Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, "How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 10 (October 3, 2015): 795–813, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1059103>.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (July 1, 2012): 142–77, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00091](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00091).

relative to terrorism or negotiation, when ethical or emotional concerns may engender complicated and contingent social support.

### *Strategy and Strategic Change*

The argument here is not that organizational culture contains static preferences for particular strategies. Instead, this is a dynamic theory intending to account for strategy by merit of strategic change. Strategy is iterative such that the most immediate and important cause of a given strategy is what strategy came before. How insurgent organizations change strategy over time—calculating and recalculating as events proceed—is determined by their organizational culture. This is a constitutive cause, as nonetheless these are actors making rational calculations, but that rationality is narrowly bounded by uncertainty and the filter of culture. This is akin to “rump materialism”; the material world’s effect on actors’ behavior is limited to the distribution of capabilities, the technical composition of capabilities, and geography.<sup>61</sup> These interact with iterative events and organizational culture to produce strategy. Though it’s outside the purview of this dissertation, it’s worth noting that some strategies may condition the future and make other strategies more or less likely; capturing territory via insurgency, for example, makes negotiation more likely.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Staniland.

<sup>62</sup> Victor Asal, Daniel Gustafson, and Peter Krause, “It Comes with the Territory: Why States Negotiate with Ethno-Political Organizations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (April 3, 2019): 363–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1373428>.

## Conclusion

Insurgent organizational culture can powerfully determine strategy, over time becoming increasingly determinative as its greatest effect is on the ability of an insurgent organization to change strategies. Insurgent organizations form strategy by gathering information, interpreting it, and converting it into action. This process is conditioned by existing beliefs, practices, and norms that together constitute insurgent organizational culture. There are two features of organizational culture: embeddedness and reactivity. Embeddedness determines the prioritization of different sources of information: the more embedded, the more social information is preferred to interorganizational information, and vice versa when less embedded. Reactivity—a cultural quality unrelated to the question of the ability of an organization to adapt effectively to specific conditions—determines the preference for strategic change in an organization. High reactivity or dynamic organizations, faced with an unclear path forward, prefer to experiment with new strategies or change up their approach to existing strategy with new tactics or targets. Static organizations are the opposite, preferring to continue the strategic course when uncertainty is acute. Together, these aspects of organizational culture determine the course of strategic change in an insurgency.

Identifying strategic change requires identifying strategy. I divide insurgent strategy into four potential ideal-types, separated based on who they target and how. Who they target varies between civilians and militaries, and how they target them can be either violent or non-violent. This produces a matrix of four strategies: terrorism (violence against civilians), insurgency (violence against government), civil resistance (non-violence against civilians), and negotiation (non-violence against government).

Identifying strategies and tracing the arc of strategic change allows an analysis of preferences expressed most clearly in totality and over time; organizations may make some strategic choices counter to their preferences, limiting the generalizability of any one strategic choice, but the sum of strategic choices bends towards underlying preferences, especially in long-term insurgencies.

I plan to show through a comparison among the major Palestinian militias— Hamas (Resisters), the PFLP (Reactors), and Fatah (Reasonablist)—how differing organizational cultures impacted the willingness and ability of each to change strategy under similar conditions. I will identify each group’s organizational culture through in-depth interview and archival data, followed by a recounting of Palestinian strategic history and the behavior of each organization within it to match the actual processes of strategy to those predicted by my theory of insurgent organizational culture. After comparing these findings to alternative explanations from materialists, structuralists, and culturalists, I plan to show that organizational culture can better explain the variation within Palestinian insurgent strategy than existing alternatives.

### **The Palestinian National Movement: Jordan**

The beginnings of the Palestinian revolution are often romanticized. The *fedayeen*—the Arabic name for Palestinian guerillas—were central to the imagining of resistance to Israel and Palestinian identity, the heroic defenders of the homeland defined by their battle prowess and persistence. Upon closer inspection, the imagining of the *fedayeen* was the central purpose of the *fedayeen*. The early days of the Palestinian fight against Israel can be defined by the coexistence of hope and failure. As organizations formed, merged, split, and groped blindly for a workable strategy, they were met with repeated and increasingly catastrophic failures. Nonetheless there persisted a broad belief that Palestinian victory over Israel was attainable, and thousands of Palestinians flocked to the cause as a result. Palestinian militias even benefitted from the support of the USSR and China, connecting them to an anti-Western international movement achieving contemporary victories in Cuba and Vietnam. This contradiction between a mood of incumbent victory and a reality of persistent failure was not present in the leadership of the Palestinian militias, who generally held sober views of their prospects for military victory. Nonetheless, they persisted in pursuing violent strategies, namely raids on Israeli border positions, bombing and shooting attacks on Israeli civilians, airplane hijackings, and kidnappings. Why didn't Palestinian militias look to contemporary non-violent movements like Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi? Why did violence persist in the face of failure?

The variation in strategy observed in Palestinian militias is best explained by their organizational cultures. The social and interorganizational information the militias were

receiving was pushing for violence, even as tactical information screamed for a change. This change would only come when new information provided the impetus or sources of information lost clarity. Fatah's acceptance of negotiation as a potential strategy only came as the international community began to accept Palestinian nationhood beyond the Communist bloc and tactical failures had begun to stack up; the PFLP gave up on terrorism after social support seemed to dry up in conjunction with repeated failures. Both represented the most obvious desire of Palestinians: an independent political representation. Independence deserves special emphasis; Arab states at the time were determined to wield, rather than support, Palestinian nationalism. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was at first an Egyptian construction intended to co-opt Palestinian political aspirations—but Fatah, the PFLP, and other Palestinian militant organizations reversed this intention, co-opting the PLO and making it into a quasi-government for Palestinians.

Fatah and the PFLP's strategic changes during this time can best be explained by their divergent organizational cultures. Though both are reactive—and thereby responsive and attuned to tactical information and prefer to change strategy absent other information—their different levels of embeddedness produced drastically different strategic responses to their conditions. Whereas Fatah's tactical failures in Jordan and Lebanon drove it towards negotiation, a conciliatory position towards potential non-Palestinian and non-Israeli adversaries, and away from terrorism, the PFLP's same failures drove it to double down on a "people's war" against Israel, take a harder stance in regional and non-Palestinian conflicts, and invest in civil society in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

This chapter has two central theoretical points. First, an empirical review will give body to the dynamics of organizational and cultural formation, showing how each organization's beginnings constitute its culture. This lends support to the conception of organizational founding as the source of culture: from the outset, the cultural outlook of each insurgent group is evident, and more importantly, it persists. Second, the primary difference between the two initial organizations is their embeddedness, so the chapter's theoretical focus is how differences in preferences for information—social and interorganizational—produce different strategies, especially over time. The differences are small at first, but as critical moments like Black September create increasingly difficult strategic circumstances, strategies rapidly diverge in line with informational preferences. As social and interorganizational information began to sharply bifurcate, Palestinian insurgent organizations were faced with a choice: appeal to their constituency or appeal to international powers. Each organization's preference had clear and powerful effects on their strategy, as predicted.

Before exploring the first phase of the Palestinian war against Israel—which I designate as 1965-1975, beginning with Fatah's first raids as "al-Asifah" and ending with the onset of the Lebanese Civil War—I review each organization's founding to establish their organizational cultures as constituted at their birth. After establishing their organizational cultures and inception, I walk through the history of Palestinian strategy between 1965 and 1975 while simultaneously assessing the information environment to show that organizational culture produced different strategic reactions to similar information and the quality of information strengthened the effect of culture. I conclude with a review of strategy and the information environment to show how organizational

culture drove differing interpretations and prioritizations of incoming information. In the interest of chronology, I begin with Fatah's founding.

Figure 3: Organizational Culture of Palestinian Militant Organizations

		<i>Embeddedness</i>	
		<b>Anchored</b>	<b>Floating</b>
<i>Reactivity</i>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<i>PFLP</i> ( <i>Responder</i> )	<i>Fatah</i> ( <i>Reasonablist</i> )
	<b>Static</b>	<i>Hamas</i> ( <i>Resister</i> )	

### Foundations: Fatah and PFLP Formation, 1956 – 1969

#### *Fatah's Opening*

Fatah was born from a basic principle: Palestinians needed to liberate Palestine themselves. The belief in Palestinian independent action supplanted previous hopes that, after their failure in 1948, the Arab states would recoup militarily and defeat Israel—in particular, this hope crystallized around the person of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the newly minted leader of Egypt, an opponent of Western colonialism, and a harsh critic of Israel.<sup>1</sup> In the mid to late 1950s, Palestinians joined Arab militaries, the Gazan Muslim Brotherhood (operating under Egyptian rule at this time) and Palestinian-specific *fedayeen* regiments organized by Nasser. It was in these groups that the two central

<sup>1</sup> Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford University Press, 1997). 83.

founders of Fatah, Yasser Arafat and Khalil al-Wazir, first gained military training and experience.

Fatah's founders represented a very specific milieu of Palestinian refugees: militant university students. Arafat received military training, and in turn trained other students, from the Gazan Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1950s. He also was elected head of the League of Palestinian Students (also known as the Palestinian Students Union) in 1952. The latter organization would serve as a foundational network for Fatah leaders and in turn encourage the future of a non-ideological program; the League was the only Palestinian political organization that remained intact, was not controlled by an Arab government, and held democratic elections. Arafat and his slate of future Fatah leaders won handily running on a Palestinian identity and Palestinian self-reliance absent any specific program and including a Communist, a Baathist, and a Muslim Brother on their slate.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Wazir had organized a large contingent of refugee teenagers into a ramshackle guerilla group under the auspices of the Muslim Brotherhood,<sup>3</sup> from whom they received some weapons and training. Most Palestinians training under the Muslim Brotherhood did not join out of their commitment to political Islamism but because of their attraction to political violence. Sayigh notes that, "The Palestinian members [of the Brotherhood] were not noted for their piety, but for their keen interest in handling weapons."<sup>4</sup> This potent combination of radical student politics and underground military mobilization would form the basis of Fatah's founding ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> Laurie A. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for State* (Columbia University Press, 1988). 67.

<sup>3</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood was an organization founded in Egypt in 1928 to promote the inclusion of Islamic teachings, values, and doctrine in politics.

<sup>4</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 86.

This contingent of Palestinians began to see independent Palestinian action as the most important feature of their organizing. After the Suez Crisis in 1956, Arafat, Wazir, and others among the militant student movement conceptualized an independent Palestinian military force that would become Fatah. The 8 years between the 1956 Suez Crisis and Fatah's formal founding in 1964 saw its nascent leadership spread across the Middle East and Europe, building networks, finishing degrees, and accruing resources. But they came together to charter Fatah in 1964, merging a variety of other Palestinian nationalist organizations alongside the networks Wazir, Arafat, and others had built. Fatah's founding idea was an inversion of the previous plan for Palestinian liberation; instead of Arab unity liberating Palestine, liberating Palestine would produce Arab unity.<sup>5</sup> This idea was expressed most clearly in Fatah's founding document, *Structure of*

*Revolutionary Construction:*

Our people have lived, driven out in every country, humiliated in the lands of exile, without a homeland, without dignity, without leadership, without hope, without weapons, without direction, without support, without association, without respect, without existence...in all the long years that have passed we clung to our hopes and waited with great patience, until all hope had melted away... '[Revolution is the only answer, anything else is to] surrender to the circumstances that surround us, remain silent about our situation, and fall back on our dependency...to justify our shortcomings and silence, to obscure with all manner of pretexts our recalcitrance and hesitation. In this way we would seal out inevitable fate and condemn ourselves as a people willing to accept indignity...with revolution we will restore people's self-confidence and capabilities and restore the world's confidence in us and respect for us.<sup>6</sup>

The independence of Palestinian decision and Palestinian identity were a reaction to what Arafat and the other Fatah founders saw as intentional Arab undercutting of a distinct

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<sup>5</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Fatah, "Hayka' al-Bina' al-Thawri (Structure of Revolutionary Construction)," c 1959.

Palestinian national identity.<sup>7</sup> This was also a source of their refusal to take an ideological stance; as Arafat had in the student union elections, ideological disagreements would take a backseat to the task of liberating Palestine through creating a Palestinian military to defeat Israel through armed struggle.

Fatah saw its primary immediate goal as establishing and asserting Palestinian identity through armed struggle—borrowing from the anti-colonial philosophies of Frantz Fanon.<sup>8</sup> The fear of Fatah’s leaders was not military defeat but an erasure of Palestinian identity akin to indigenous people in the United States or Australia. But the development of Palestinian identity via armed struggle had material goals underpinning it as well; in theory, armed struggle would free Palestinians from the constraints of Arab politics and allow them to follow a distinctly Palestinian political path, which in turn would of course boost Fatah’s prominence and recruitment as the premier organization advocating violent Palestinian revolution.

Fatah’s founding has three important features so far unmentioned. First, prior to the start of the first military campaign, Fatah had not yet centralized control over all its disparate networks littered across the Middle East. Nonetheless, structurally, power was in the hands of a small council of central leaders. Arafat and Wazir were able to rule by fiat, especially when deciding the international direction of the organization. Wazir was able to develop a strong relationship with the newly independent Algerian state, which led to connections with Vietnam and Cuba, eventually culminating in Arafat and Wazir meeting with Mao in China. Though these meetings had few material gains, Algeria

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<sup>7</sup> Clovis Maksoud, ed., “Abu Iyad [Salah Khalaf], Fatah,” in *Palestine Lives: Interviews with Leaders of the Resistance*. (Beirut: Palestine Research Center and Kuwaiti Teachers Association, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 91; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (François Maspero, 1961).

agreed to train some Palestinian militants in basic military tactics. They were not able to purchase weapons—they instead scavenged them from battlefields and bought them on the black market, limiting them to older small arms.<sup>9</sup>

Second, Fatah was a military first and did not have a political wing; a Fatah leader was later quoted as saying “we do not distinguish between political and military action.”<sup>10</sup> This makes good sense given the military backgrounds of its founders and their belief in—and, indeed, dedication to—military means. Political and military decision-making were not merely joined structurally, but also ideationally: it would be one thing for a single body to make decisions on both fronts, but Fatah did not accept the separation at all, seeing all its military actions as political and its political actions as military.

Lastly, the character of mobilization undertaken by Fatah’s founders between 1956 and 1964 was decidedly military, not political. Much of this organizing was simply making connections with other armed groups, which Wazir took on due to his wide connections with Palestinian militants. Arafat, for his part, focused on raising funds from wealthy Palestinian connections in the Gulf and elsewhere. An interviewee recalled Arafat visiting his childhood home to solicit money from his father, a banker; during his visit, Arafat agreed diplomatically to allow the interviewee, then an earnest 10-year-old asking to join Fatah, to take a non-binding oath of loyalty to the Palestinian cause, advising him to return for more serious duties when he was older.<sup>11</sup> Much of their funding came from popular committees in Saudi Arabia, which were permitted so long as

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<sup>9</sup> Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Maksoud, “Abu Iyad [Salah Khalaf], Fatah.”

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

Fatah did not organize clandestinely or publish anything political.<sup>12</sup> I measure embeddedness on the partial basis of a pre-war political mobilization; these efforts do not satisfy that condition. Rather, Fatah's founding fathers were undertaking a distinctly military mobilization, lacking any real political content or persuasion. Arafat's fundraising was centered on elites, and these funding networks would soon be mostly supplanted by the Arab state support Arafat was seeking anyway. To the extent there was support from Palestinians in those first years, it was exclusively the wealthiest among them.<sup>13</sup> Arafat and the other original Fatah leaders believed in the power of mobilizing resources, not people, as this most early endeavor shows.

Thus, we find Fatah constituted as reasonable: a floating and dynamic organization. Fatah was floating in that it lacked a political wing, it did not come from a pre-war political mobilization, it lacked connections to social institutions, and centered its leadership around charismatic individuals. Arafat in particular established his control over the bulk of military forces early on.<sup>14</sup> Fatah was dynamic due to its investment in fungible capabilities in money, light arms, and basic military training, its anti-ideological core beliefs, and its centralized structure, though in the early days this was only a formal centralization to be actualized in the next decade. These qualities would become essential components in the decision to launch the armed struggle earlier than intended in 1965. But before discussing the start of the insurgency, another player must be established: the Arab National Movement, precursor to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

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<sup>12</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Rouleau, "The Palestinian Quest," *Foreign Affairs* 53, no. 2 (1975): 274.

<sup>14</sup> Sayigh. 103.

*Arab Nationalism or Palestinian Socialism?*

The three figures who would come to form the core of the PFLP were George Habash, Wadi Haddad, and Nayef Hawatma—though Habash is by far the most central. A medical doctor from Lydda, Habash was radicalized by his family’s flight to Lebanon and witnessing the violence against Palestinians in 1948. He graduated from the American University in Beirut (AUB) the next year and immediately gave up pediatrics to take up arms against Israel. He first joined the “Battalions of Arab Sacrifice”, a quasi-fascist militant group committed to violence with no meaningful political agenda outside of revenge. This quickly alienated Habash, who then began organizing through student organizations at AUB—this included taking recruits to visit injured victims of Israeli violence in the hospital.<sup>15</sup> It was then, in 1951, Habash met Haddad among these recruits; they merged with other student organizations, including one run by Nayef Hawatma, to form the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM).

The ANM was committed specifically to the liberation of Palestine but believed that they first had to overthrow the Western-backed Arab governments so Arab resources could be concentrated on defeating Israel. Haddad would often say, “the road to Tel Aviv leads through Damascus, Baghdad, Amman, and Cairo.”<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the ANM focused centrally on Palestinian issues, mobilizing refugees in the Lebanese camps to resist U.S. plans for resettlement while organizing popular committees in the camps alongside clandestine armed cells.<sup>17</sup> Haddad, Habash, and much of the ANM leadership then moved from Beirut to Amman or Damascus, where they continued a political

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<sup>15</sup> Eli Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography: Ideology and Politics in the Struggle for Palestine*, Sidrah Le-Historyah (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Sayigh. 73.

mobilization of Arab nationalists. Habash established a clinic, a debate club, and a literacy school in Amman, while also working alongside Jordanian allies to establish a political forum.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of Nasser and Nasserism, particularly after the success in 1956, led the ANM to become explicit supporters of the Nasserite political program. This political support allowed the ANM to enter the military scene for the first time where it would serve Egyptian foreign policy priorities, in particular through the patronage of Syrian intelligence—which for most of this time was part of the United Arab Republic and thereby taking its orders from Egypt anyway. This was a short-lived arrangement. By 1963, after a series of shifting alliances and coups, the ANM were kicked out of three out of four of their central operating theaters: Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, leaving only Lebanon. Nonetheless, the ANM had made the best of its brief alliances, gaining some basic military training and supplies of light arms.<sup>19</sup>

In the early 1960s the ANM began to experience an identity crisis. Burgeoning Palestinian nationalism encouraged the Palestinians in the ANM to begin establishing specifically Palestinian structures in the ANM, even endorsing independent Palestinian action (albeit with planned Egyptian and Syrian support).<sup>20</sup> Palestinians in the camps had been expressing their disapproval of the ideological debates, the lack of actions against Israel, and non-Palestinian, non-refugee leadership in the ANM, and the ANM heard them. In 1963, the ANM executive committee agreed to allow Habash, Haddad, and Hawatma to form a Palestinian wing of the ANM—the Palestinian Action Command

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<sup>18</sup> Walid Kazzuha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and His Comrades from Nationalism to Marxism* (C. Knight, 1975). 17-24.

<sup>19</sup> Kazzuha. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 79.

(PAC)—though even this fully Palestinian part of the ANM would still refuse to start a fight with Israel absent Nasser’s approval.<sup>21</sup>

Habash grew impatient with repeated rejections from Nasser to launch attacks on Israel, with Nasser specifically forbidding cross-border attacks from Arab states in favor of the far more difficult and dangerous tactic of pushing a revolt from inside Israel; Habash would later be highly critical of this restraint.<sup>22</sup> The PAC did increase reconnaissance and recruitment efforts in Israel, but remained dedicated to an Arab, rather than Palestinian, war of liberation. This disagreement with Fatah’s “Palestine First” idea ironically came from a different reading of the same influences in Vietnam, China, Cuba, and Algeria; it is worth noting, however, that the ANM understanding was based on minimal information or experience.<sup>23</sup>

The following years leading up to the June War in 1967 were disastrous for the ANM, as the Egyptian and Jordanian states began to crackdown on certain ANM cohorts. This pushed Habash even further towards independent Palestinian action, and he began establishing cooperative agreements with the nascent Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), then a front for Egyptian influence in Palestinian politics. As he was building military capabilities, Habash was particularly careful not to create a military organization that could dominate the political side.<sup>24</sup> The PAC were ascendant in the ANM, and after the soon to come war in June 1967, Habash would officially announce the PAC’s merger

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<sup>21</sup> Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography*.

<sup>22</sup> PFLP, “The Organizational, Political, and Financial Report” (Fourth National Congress, April 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Sayigh. 137.

with several other Palestinian groups to form the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in December that year.<sup>25</sup>

As with Fatah, some critical details remain unmentioned in this founding narrative. Firstly, the PFLP represented a leftist shift from the PAC and the ANM with its embrace of scientific socialism. This turn was earnest—the PFLP would remain a socialist organization in perpetuity—but relatively shallow. Future recruits would only have to study PFLP tracts rather than reading Marx, Lenin, or Mao; plus, Habash and Haddad would both eschew or morph ideology when it suited their strategic goals.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, despite a low investment in it, the PFLP had a solid ideology that Fatah lacked, which included a socialist-oriented social program the PFLP felt was central to their political identity.

The PFLP's structure and leadership reflected the ANM's organization and broader communist organization. They organized their political organization based on democratic centralism around an elected leadership council.<sup>27</sup> Internal politics nonetheless centered around the person and charisma of Habash; though he did not always get his way, this was the exception rather than the rule. Democratic centralism is defined by its collective leadership in conjunction with a rigidly hierarchical military structure, and the PFLP was no exception—it maintained the pyramid structure of the ANM, and in fact many of its cadres were carried over from the ANM.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "PFLP, DFLP, PFLP-GC, Palestinian Leftists," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/pflp-dflp-pflp-gc-palestinian-leftists>.

<sup>26</sup> Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography*; As'ad Abu Khalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," *Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 361–78.

<sup>27</sup> Abu Khalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP."

<sup>28</sup> Abu Khalil.

From all of this, the PFLP can be classified as a responder organization: anchored and dynamic. Like Fatah, the PFLP is dynamic in its hierarchical structure and fungible capabilities, particularly small arms and general military training. Even more than Fatah, the PFLP invested in organization-building and operational security. It differs in that it maintained an ideology but did not significantly invest in it outside of using it for recruitment and practical mobilization.<sup>29</sup> The PFLP diverges significantly from Fatah in being anchored to the Palestinian refugee community, particularly in Lebanon. Not only did the PFLP undertake extensive political mobilization in the camps, but it founded and formed relationships with a variety of societal actors. Though somewhat weak and tied to Habash, it also maintained a collective leadership. Perhaps most importantly and contrary to Fatah, the PFLP strongly maintained the dominance of the political over the military, and Habash was repeatedly firm on this point.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*.

<sup>30</sup> Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography*.

Figure 4: Fatah Strategy: 1965 - 1975

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	1970 – 1975	Assassination of Jordanian PM Tal (11/28/71) Munich Olympics Kidnapping (9/5/72) Savoy Hotel Attack (3/6/75)	Experimentation under uncertainty	Strong inter-organizational information, tactical information
<i>Insurgency</i>	1965 –	Battle of Karameh (3/21/68)	Experimentation under uncertainty	N/A [persisted due to belief in primacy of “armed struggle” as strategy]
<i>Negotiation</i>	1974 –	1974 PNC session accepts potential state in WB and Gaza Arafat addresses UN (11/13/74)	Strong inter-organizational information	N/A [Beginning of transition from “only armed struggle” to “only negotiation”]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Reasonablists locate power in international legitimacy, so negotiation > civil resistance]	N/A [Fear of homegrown non-PLO leaders in West Bank and Gaza who favored non-violence]

Figure 5: PFLP Strategy: 1965 - 1975

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	1968 –	Athens Flight 253 Airplane Hijacking (12/26/1968)  Dawson’s Field Airplane Hijackings (9/6/1970)  Chen Theater Bombing (12/12/74)	Experimentation under uncertainty	N/A [Successful in bolstering prominence esp. in competition with moderating Fatah]
<i>Insurgency</i>	1967 –	Attempt to overthrow Jordanian regime in Black September (September 1970)  Cross-border raids into Israel proper (primarily 1968 – 1970)	Strong social information	N/A [persisted due to popular belief in primacy of “armed struggle” as strategy]
<i>Negotiation</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strong belief non-violence could not open Israel to refugees of ‘48]	N/A [Responders locate power in people, not international diplomacy/prestige]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strong belief non-violence could not open Israel to refugees of ‘48]	N/A [Fear of homegrown non-PLO leaders in West Bank and Gaza who favored non-violence]

## The Storm and Palestinian Dignity: Insurgency and Terrorism, 1965 – 1970

### *Al-Asifah*

Fatah's first strategic outing against Israel came in 1965 their initial strategy was insurgency. Arafat was responsible for preparations, which were woefully inadequate; the plan was to establish a large set of strike forces capable of infiltrating Israel and then sabotage infrastructure that was diverting the Jordan River headwaters, as well as killing soldiers where possible.<sup>31</sup> This was to be announced under the name "al-Asifa" or "the Storm" to hide Fatah's involvement, and most likely to gauge reactions before continuing raids. Though Fatah's original plans called for a much larger contingent and a significant support bureaucracy, Arafat was only able to cobble together 50 Palestinian fighters, pulled from various Arab intelligence services and the refugee camps.<sup>32</sup> In order to get support from the rest of Fatah's leadership, Arafat greatly exaggerated his readiness. Predictably, the two strike teams both failed their missions; one team was stopped on the Lebanese border and the other planted their bomb, but it didn't go off.<sup>33</sup> Fatah's raids would continue throughout 1965, its first campaign of the armed struggle. These raids were generally arson or shooting attacks with some minor confrontations with the IDF, none of which went well for the fedayeen.<sup>34</sup> Fatah would report 110 raids in 1965—Israeli sources claimed only 35, likely because Fatah exaggerated or double-counted raids.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmad Kalash, *Filastin Al-Thawra*, June 6, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Kalash.

<sup>33</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 107.

<sup>34</sup> William Baver Quandt et al., *The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism* (University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>35</sup> Quandt et al.

Despite its apparent tactical failures, Fatah's early entrance into the armed struggle was a logical response to the limited information they were receiving throughout 1963 and 1964. There were two main pressures pushing them to launch the armed struggle earlier than planned and without proper preparation. First, private donor networks in Kuwait withheld funds until Fatah provided proof of military action: quite literally incentivizing a strategy of insurgency.<sup>36</sup> Second, the newly minted Algerian government, having just won its own insurgency against the French, argued that Fatah had already delayed too long and should press an offensive immediately.<sup>37</sup> Both of these were sources of interorganizational information pushing insurgency, which Fatah's floating organizational culture prioritized. But more importantly, information was generally weak at this time; it was not at all clear that a strategy of insurgency would garner broader support as the Egyptians were reluctant and there was no real way to systematically identify popular Palestinian opinion on the issue. Insofar as Palestinian public opinion could be observed at the time, it was split between belief in Arab responsibility for fighting Israel, communist's accommodation within Israel, and support for independent Palestinian political organization.<sup>38</sup> So here Fatah's dynamic culture pushed them to experiment under uncertainty, launching an insurgency in the hopes of shaking up stagnant Palestinian national politics.

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<sup>36</sup> Khalil al-Wazir, *Fateh: Genesis, Rise, Evolution, Legitimate Representative—Beginnings Part One*, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 106

<sup>38</sup> Sayigh, 83.

*Struggling to Struggle*

Fatah's attacks throughout 1965 were primarily tactical failures. They provoked a harsh response from the Egyptians, they did not accomplish their immediate tactical objectives, and they drove Israeli reprisals that would escalate tensions leading up to the catastrophic 1967 war. But this was not a cause for concern for Fatah—as Sayigh puts bluntly, “effectiveness was not a priority.”<sup>39</sup> Fatah's plan at this time was twofold: *fait accompli* the Arab states into acting against Israel and activate Palestinian identity to attract new recruits. Calling this a plan may be exaggerating their preparation, however.

Fatah's strategy was built on three pillars: innovation through experience, identity through action, and organization through revolution. On the first pillar, Wazir made it clear in his own words: Fatah would “learn war by waging it”<sup>40</sup>—they believed that launching the armed conflict was the critical step in forming a revolutionary base and sparking upheaval.<sup>41</sup> These ideas appealed to Fatah due to the second pillar. There was a psychological distress amidst Palestinians from their second-class citizen status as refugees and their dispossession.<sup>42</sup> In Fatah's founding document, they note,

Our people have lived, driven out in every country, humiliated in the lands of exile, without a homeland, without dignity, without leadership, without hope, without weapons, without direction, without support, without association, without respect, without existence...in all the long years that have passed we clung to our hopes and waited with great patience, until all hope had melted away.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 120.

<sup>40</sup> Sayigh. 120.

<sup>41</sup> This was learned from the Cuban revolutionary strategy of *foco*. *Foco* was developed in opposition to Maoist and Leninist conceptions which asserted certain conditions must be met for revolution; instead, Castro argued that revolutionary action would produce the conditions necessary for revolution.

<sup>42</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

<sup>43</sup> Fatah, “Hayka’ al-Bina’ al-Thawri (Structure of Revolutionary Construction).”

The way to reclaim their dignity was armed struggle. If the first pillar was tactical and the second constitutive, the third was instrumental. Action was a powerful resource for recruitment at this time, and the popularity of the initial raids showed the mood amongst Palestinian refugees broadly supported doing *something*.<sup>44</sup> By taking action, even the repeated botched jobs Fatah undertook in 1965 and 1966, the organization would grow.<sup>45</sup> Though Fatah was not culturally disposed towards prioritizing social information, here it aligned with interorganizational information: Fatah was encouraged by Algeria and Syria, the former having just showcased their insurgent credentials.

These three pillars were mutually reinforcing and deeply interrelated. The end-goal of the strategy was not just the mobilization of Palestinians to fight, but of the broader Arab masses and states, loosely defined. The strategy of entangling Arab states in a conflict through independent action was at best contradictory; the ANM argued it would allow the Arab states to abdicate responsibility, while Fatah argued that Palestinians needed to escalate independently to accelerate the process. This in part also reflects cultural differences; the ANM, as a nascent anchored PFLP was concerned that they could be inviting deadly reprisals on their civilian population. Floating Fatah saw these people as resources to be expended rather than people to be protected. Regardless, this all pointed towards taking armed action and figuring out the rest as they went. For Fatah, everything, from the individual Palestinian's psychology to the broader Palestinian identity to the structure of international politics, pointed in one direction: a strategy of insurgency.

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<sup>44</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B; Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 91.; Khaled, *My people shall live*. 88.

<sup>45</sup> Maksoud, "Abu Iyad [Salah Khalaf], Fatah."

Between 1965 and 1967 Fatah launched a flurry of attacks. The ANM struggled to catch up but declared its readiness in early 1967 and announced a handful of raids, beginning a strategy of insurgency that would continue through its transition into the PFLP. The mood was high; but it was not to last. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 was an infamously total Israeli victory. The catastrophic defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in 1967 had two immediate effects. First and foremost, Fatah's strategy of entangling Arab states in conflict with Israel was now moot. Though Fatah criticized the Arab regimes, they nonetheless trusted in Arab military strength; the 1967 war destroyed that faith. Second, Fatah saw a wave of new recruits that quickly made it the strongest Palestinian faction.<sup>46</sup> Lastly, both Fatah and the ANM—soon to become the PFLP—set about rethinking their strategy in the face of new constraints and opportunities. Primarily, both organizations saw the new Israeli occupation of the formerly-Jordanian controlled West Bank and Gaza as an opportunity to make for themselves a revolutionary base *a la* North Vietnam, though the critical question of whether to establish an independent political entity there was left for the future.

Fatah was, as before, the first to act in the postwar environment. This was, in part, due to energy from below; Fatah leadership recognized that delaying action would be unpopular with the rank-and-file, who may not obey anyway.<sup>47</sup> Fatah had also received an influx of trained troops sent abroad for military instruction in China and Algeria.<sup>48</sup> Fatah believed itself, at this point, to be strong enough to restart the armed struggle. In August 1967, two months after the war ended, Arafat led a strike team into the West

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<sup>46</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 158.

<sup>47</sup> Sayigh. 158.; Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Yezid Sayigh, "Turning Defeat into Opportunity: The Palestinian Guerrillas after the June 1967 War," *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (1992): 244–65.

Bank to begin preparations and gather intelligence for an armed struggle, acting against the stated wishes of the ANM and the Syrian government. This was the first of several times Arafat would gain popularity among Palestinians by putting himself and his fighters on the frontlines when odds were stacked against them and others refrained or retreated; it became his signature move throughout his political career, with great effect. His soldiers began calling him “commander-in-chief”, which Arafat apparently liked very much. As recruits flowed in and Arafat exaggerated Fatah’s readiness, a new strategy emerged of small guerilla action scaling up into a “popular liberation war”.<sup>49</sup> With only small arms gathered from abandoned battlefields, including some given to Fatah by the Syrians and the Chinese, Fatah hoped to spark a mass insurrection. The strategy was to build a clandestine network of support in the villages that would undergird a wider violent uprising; this would create liberated zones, from which Fatah could emerge as a public-facing national leadership.

Fatah was still singularly focused on armed struggle even as the Israelis were dealing with a wave of uncoordinated non-violent protests in the newly occupied West Bank. Most people in the newly occupied territories assumed the occupation would be brief, that armed resistance would only invite violent reprisal, and that civil resistance was a better path forward. As one Fatah official reported being told by a local community leader, “whoever fires a bullet is a traitor.”<sup>50</sup> Though they were able to absorb some smaller militant groups, Fatah’s armed struggle was rejected by the local political leaders.

Fatah’s strategy of insurgency rapidly failed. Centrally this was due to poor operational security; new recruits were hastily trained and given no instructions on how

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<sup>49</sup> Maksoud, “Abu Iyad [Salah Khalaf], Fatah.”

<sup>50</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 163.

to evade authorities. Israeli police rounded up most Fatah cadres by the end of 1967 and Arafat barely escaped the West Bank. Another attempt to form networks in early 1968 failed within months. There was, however, a belief among some Fatah leaders that the abortive armed struggle inside occupied Palestine had prevented the Israelis from asserting a political solution in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>51</sup> And, as always, the act of resistance itself was a strong bona fide for recruitment. The resistance would survive the setback; Fatah began setting itself up to begin fighting across the Jordanian border.

The ANM was just as surprised by the 1967 Arab defeat as Fatah. Unlike Fatah, the ANM took the defeat and the destruction of their networks in the West Bank as a sign they had to rebuild organizational and military capabilities before restarting the armed struggle.<sup>52</sup> This restraint was supported by Nasser; he himself was rebuilding military capacity, and promised ANM leaders he would relaunch the war with Israel soon. But the ANM was also facing the same pressure from below as Fatah: Habash had noted cadres threatening to emigrate if the armed struggle did not begin again soon.<sup>53</sup> Attempts to coordinate with Fatah were stalled when Fatah restarted military operations during negotiations with the ANM to restart military operations together. This added additional pressure to begin fighting, as the ANM struggled to gain recruits, prevent recruits from defecting to the more active and capable Fatah, and solicit donations from a Palestinian refugee base that demanded action.<sup>54</sup> What began as a moment for rebuilding quickly became the critical moment to take action, despite the poor state of the organization in the West Bank. The urgency had increased greatly as Nasser reversed his position to push the

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<sup>51</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 164.

<sup>52</sup> Kazziha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World*.

<sup>53</sup> Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography*.

<sup>54</sup> Sayigh, "Turning Defeat into Opportunity."

ANM to begin attacking across the Lebanese and Jordanian border and draw the Israelis away from the Egyptian front. The overeager launch of the ANM Palestinian branch's armed struggle in December 1967 saw them formally declare themselves as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). This declaration precipitated their first strike, a failed attack on Ben Gurion airport, and the immediate obliteration of the ANM networks in the occupied territories by 1968. The ANM leadership ordered a full withdrawal into Jordan, effectively ending their tenure as an active organization as the PFLP became the center of the socialist-nationalist faction within the Palestinian national movement.

Strategically, launching a mass insurrection in the mold of the 1936 Arab Revolt against the British never came to fruition. Instead, Fatah and the PFLP were forced to retreat into Jordan as the Israelis took advantage of their lack of preparation and arrested most of their networks, vulnerable from a lack of investment in operational security. Nonetheless, both organizations had demonstrated a capacity for military action demanded of them by both the refugee communities and their patron Arab states in Syria and Egypt. Armed struggle was treated as the only option due to these demands, even as communists and local activists in the West Bank and Gaza pushed for non-violent resistance to Israel. Both the strategy of civil resistance and its advocates remained sidelined for the foreseeable future.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 173.

*Fighting for Dignity*

Now on the back foot, Palestinian forces regrouped in Jordan. The border town and refugee camp Karama was their central base as Palestinian guerillas began establishing a sizable force in the Jordan Valley—much to the chagrin of the Jordanian king, who was nonetheless hamstrung by the guerilla's popularity in Jordan. Cross-border raids into Israel, while ineffective, incited an Israeli reprisal in March 1968. Israeli troops and armor approached Karama, where a roughly equivalent Jordanian contingent had established defenses and the much smaller force of Palestinian guerillas debated strategy. The PFLP, reflecting their Maoist strategic thinking, planned a tactical retreat in the face of the numerically and qualitatively superior Israeli force.<sup>56</sup> Arafat had other ideas. As the PFLP retreated and urged the other Palestinian guerillas to do the same, Fatah remained to fight the incoming Israelis in yet another instance of Arafat's signature tactic of putting himself and his troops in mortal danger for the sake of credibility in the eyes of the Palestinian public.<sup>57</sup>

What followed became Palestinian legend. The legend being far more important than the actual events, I will start with the latter in brief. Essentially, 15,000 Israeli troops entered Karama under fire from Jordanian artillery while Palestinian and Jordanian ground troops engaged Israeli paratroopers. The Israelis destroyed the Palestinian base and returned to Israel, suffering unexpected losses, including several tanks. Nonetheless, their human losses were small: 28 soldiers dead, to Jordan's 61 and Fatah's 92. The

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<sup>56</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, "The Political Mythology of the Battle of Karamah," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (2001): 91–111.

<sup>57</sup> Said K. Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator* (London, 1999).

losses were, relatively, the worst for Fatah, who lost essentially half of their active fighting force.<sup>58</sup>

The imagined battle of Karama, bearing only a passing resemblance to the actual events, grew into a myth of enormous proportions in both Palestinian and broader Arab politics. Fatah had bet that it could survive the Israeli incursion and that doing so would revive a sense of Arab confidence after the 1967 defeat—and, of course, that an improved morale would benefit Fatah politically as the Palestinian group most closely associated with armed struggle.<sup>59</sup> Arafat's mythos was only solidified with the popularization of his response to Jordanian military leaders telling him to retreat with the PFLP: "We want to persuade the world that there are those in the Arab nation who will not withdraw and flee. Let us die under the tracks of the tanks and change the course of history in our region."<sup>60</sup> Despite the heavy casualties relative to the Israelis and the centrality of the Jordanian military, Palestinians were broadly believed to be the heroes of Karama in the Arab world, much to the chagrin of the Jordanians who fought and lost comrades there. This successful claiming of Karama as a Palestinian victory has been attributed to Fatah's propaganda machine and the desire of Arabs and Palestinians to believe in Palestinian power and Israeli vulnerability after the humiliation of 1967.<sup>61</sup> I would add the logical fact of confirmation bias: the Palestinian and Arab public had been primed to believe in

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<sup>58</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974*, 1978. 350-356. ; John K. Cooley, *Green March, Black September: The Story of the Palestinian Arabs*, 1973.

<sup>59</sup> Hani al-Hassan, "A Pause on the Fourth Anniversary of the Battle of Karama," *Shu'un Filastiniyya* 8 (April 1972); Abu Iyad and Eric Rouleau, *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle*, trans. Linda Butler Koseoglu, 1st edition (New York: Times Books, 1981).

<sup>60</sup> al-Hassan, "A Pause on the Fourth Anniversary of the Battle of Karama."

<sup>61</sup> Brigadier S.A. El-Edroos, *The Hashemite Arab Army 1908-1979* (Amman, Jordan: The Publishing Committee, 1980). 441-448.

Fatah's capability and armed struggle's efficacy by Fatah's embellished reports of their raids in Israel.

The most immediate effect of Karama was cementing Arafat as Fatah's undisputed head; he was named their official leader and spokesman within a month of Karama. Soon thereafter, Fatah leadership was invited to meet with Saudi Arabia's King Faysal, who pledged financial support.<sup>62</sup> Fatah's success also helped it to supplant the PFLP as Egypt's favored Palestinian militia—Egypt replaced the arms it had lost in Karama immediately, and Fatah was broadcasting daily on Cairo radio and sending troops to train under Egyptian auspices soon thereafter.<sup>63</sup> Over the next several months, Fatah would see its recruitment explode beyond levels it could accommodate, nonetheless garnering a fighting force of 2,000 by June 1968—multiplying its force in Karama tenfold in only three months.

At the same time, Fatah's arms procurement grew exponentially to meet the new demand and in light of its newfound prominence. Chinese arms deliveries expanded, supplying Fatah with small arms, anti-armor weapons, and mortars, alongside deliveries from Algeria and Egypt—though Syria and Iraq delivered some small arms as well and helped with logistics.<sup>64</sup> Arafat's gamble in Karama had paid off more than he had likely imagined: Fatah was not only the top Palestinian militias, but Palestinian militias in general now enjoyed more support both internationally and in Arab and Palestinian publics.

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<sup>62</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 62-63.

<sup>63</sup> Iyad and Rouleau. 62-63.

<sup>64</sup> al-Wazir, *Fateh: Genesis, Rise, Evolution, Legitimate Representative—Beginnings Part One*. 82.

This new support meant Fatah, the PFLP, and the other militias were free to operate within the refugee camps. Fatah had taken on more recruits than it could equip and train—it had scaled up to conduct underground guerilla work with a few hundred fighters in the previous few years but had no experience with organizing a standing fighting force of thousands.<sup>65</sup> This led to marked indiscipline in the ranks as Fatah fighters solicited “donations” from Lebanese and Jordanian citizens and brandished their arms at local officials.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Fatah began to form civilian militias, which meant more weapons in the street, and in the hands of less disciplined operators. But this was all in the context of Arafat securing control over Fatah’s institutions: power over strategy remained firmly in his hands, and he continued to push armed struggle with international and local refugee support.

Meanwhile, the PFLP floundered. Soon after a faction split off in protest of the decision to retreat at Karama, the PFLP also suffered the loss of Egyptian support. This was both because Fatah had essentially supplanted them and because they had begun to publicly criticize Nasser.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, they were able to ride the Karama wave and gain a substantial number of recruits. But this was no relief, as there was internal recognition that this was Fatah’s victory; the PFLP had become the minority opposition and needed to compete.

Karama was a critical source of information for the Palestinians. Seemingly overnight, they had succeeded in transforming Palestinian identity. Leila Khaled, who joined the PFLP around this time, frames it well in her autobiography: ““Are you a

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<sup>65</sup> Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation*. 139.

<sup>66</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 183, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Harold M. Cubert, *The PFLP’s Changing Role in the Middle East* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

refugee, Leila?’ she said to me. ‘Technically yes, emotionally no,’ I replied. ‘I am no longer a refugee because I am a revolutionary.’”<sup>68</sup> The basic gist of the message was that Palestinian refugees liked armed struggle, and they selected militias based on who gave them the best chance to fight Israel.<sup>69</sup> The concurrent renaissance in Palestinian art, academia, and culture reinforced this identity and assured the continuing appeal of insurgency for Palestinian refugees. This social information pushing insurgency was reinforced by strong interorganizational information also pushing insurgency. The Arab states surrounding Israel supported the guerillas for domestic political points before 1967, and as a distraction to the Israeli military while they rebuilt after 1967. The Gulf states and more distant supporters in Algeria and China also strongly indicated to the Palestinians that insurgency was the path forward. In this sense, insurgency was an overdetermined strategy at the outset, despite the militias’ miserable military performance and the fact that Palestinians living under the occupation preferred non-violent strategies, or at least Palestinian elites inside the West Bank repeatedly insisted as such.<sup>70</sup> Fatah and the PFLP continued using insurgency even as it failed tactically and was opposed by the people living on the land they wanted to govern, because it was supported and encouraged by international actors and the refugee community.

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<sup>68</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*. 110.

<sup>69</sup> This reflects findings in Mironova, Vera. *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 163.; Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

*Strategy after Karama*

Fatah and the PFLP were broadly united on strategy after Karama. Both supported an insurgency, though they differed on the particulars. Where their military plans diverged, they did so because of who they looked to as models. The PFLP saw China and Vietnam as its progenitors, and Fatah Algeria and Cuba. For Fatah, this meant primarily following the logic of *foco*: revolution would follow revolutionary action. As Abu Iyad put it, “The important thing in any revolutionary movement is not propagating an ideology but actual action. Ideology alone is meaningless if it is not put to the test.”<sup>71</sup> Fatah strategist Hani al-Hassan, trained by the Chinese, admits more simply, “practice is the first nature of Fatah, analysis its second”.<sup>72</sup> What this meant strategically was that Fatah lacked a social critique. It interchangeably used terms like “war of mass liberation” or “people’s liberation war”, without a firm definition of their content, imagining a period of clandestine guerilla action across the border, then in Israel, eventually culminating in a mass mobilization that leads the Arab states to bring their armies to support the Palestinian guerilla spearhead.<sup>73</sup>

How mass mobilization would happen, or how (and indeed, if) it would lead to the Arab states taking military action were questions left unanswered. These required a social program that Fatah did not have and was constitutively opposed to in its identity as a non-ideological movement. Some in Fatah even argued that a social program was impossible as dispossessed refugees living in exile.<sup>74</sup> Though this was completely

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<sup>71</sup> Maksoud, “Abu Iyad [Salah Khalaf], Fatah.”

<sup>72</sup> Hani al-Hassan, “Fateh between Theory and Practice: (1) The Theoretical Framework,” *Shu’un Filastiniyya* 7 (March 1972). 12.

<sup>73</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 199.

<sup>74</sup> al-Hassan, “Fateh between Theory and Practice: (1) The Theoretical Framework.” 20.

contrary to a Marxist analysis—Arafat would even deny that, as refugees, there existed any class distinction between Palestinians—it did not seem to bother the many communists who joined Fatah.<sup>75</sup> Fatah’s strategy remained the same: engage Israel with guerilla tactics until they were strong enough to temporarily hold positions in the occupied territories, then eventually transitioning to holding permanent positions.<sup>76</sup> This would then, again via unspecified dynamics, lead to a mass revolution.

The PFLP’s plan was similar in content. Like Fatah, they imagined a mass Arab mobilization overcoming Israel with sheer numbers, preceded by Palestinian guerilla action. The key difference is the PFLP did have a social program—a set of economic and social policies intimately linked with their socialist beliefs, intended to liberate Palestinians both from Israeli occupation and the negative effects of expanding global capitalism—and it meant that they could not rely on reactionary Arab regimes to support them. Nonetheless, they needed to mobilize Arab resources to defeat Israel as the Palestinians couldn’t do it alone. For the PFLP, this meant arming and organizing citizens of Arab states and a broader social transformation in the Arab states to create the “Arab Hanoi”, a secure base from which to launch operations.<sup>77</sup> But the military plan, like Fatah’s, contained a large hole in its center. The PFLP had no plan to create a secure base and clearly stated that there would be no permanent bases outside the West Bank and Gaza, and that Arab sanctuaries in Lebanon and Jordan would be used only sparingly and temporarily.<sup>78</sup> Both Fatah and the PFLP’s stated strategies were a continuation of the

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<sup>75</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 199.

<sup>76</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 60.

<sup>77</sup> PFLP, “Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine,” 1969.

<sup>78</sup> PFLP.

guerilla action that had excited refugees and served the interests of the Arab states, but framed as mere prelude to a larger insurrection that would occur through unspecified processes.

Since the utility of insurgency as a strategy was purely political, the militias quickly realized they did not actually have to absorb the material losses it would normally cause: they could just lie. Institutions constructed to combat falsified combat claims quickly fell apart as even those critical of inflating success began to do so. The PFLP resisted the urge to falsify progress more than Fatah; the PFLP was concerned that unrealistic expectations might lead to a collapse later on.<sup>79</sup> Fatah, meanwhile, was claiming by 1969 that it had entered the phase of permanently occupying enemy positions, which it was neither doing nor anywhere near strong enough to do.<sup>80</sup> As one Fatah interviewee put it, “We thought, at the time, that we could make Palestinians more active if they believed we were close to returning to Palestine, and in doing so, we actually would be.”<sup>81</sup> Fatah was solving the collective action problem by convincing recruits and the Palestinian refugee public that victory was near—and thereby, the cost of joining immediately would be low and the benefits enormous and incumbent. Of course, this demanded an eventual betrayal, but that was not a concern for Fatah—only the PFLP.<sup>82</sup> In truth, the guerillas were conducting more cross-border raids than ever and inciting near constant Israeli reprisals, but nowhere near what they claimed, and decidedly outside the occupied territories. The PFLP was the only militia that accurately identified the stage

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<sup>79</sup> PFLP, *Military Strategy of the PFLP* (Beirut: Information Department, PFLP, 1970).

<sup>80</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 206.

<sup>81</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 254.

they were in. They could irritate Israel, but their real victory was in asserting Palestine into an international agenda and the constitutive benefits of armed action.<sup>83</sup>

Attempts to establish clandestine organizations in the occupied territories roundly failed due to familiar problems of operational security and the premium on public action in the late 1960s. People in the West Bank were disinclined towards armed action, and though Gaza became a hotbed of guerilla activity—especially for the PFLP—more resources were being invested in Jordan and Lebanon than in the occupied territories.<sup>84</sup> These failures increasingly drove the PFLP and Fatah to target civilians and undertake terrorism as a new strategy. This began with the frustrated and pressured clandestine organizations in the West Bank and Gaza targeting perceived collaborators, then bomb and mortar attacks on civilian settlements intended to force the Israelis to pay a psychological cost for the occupation, damage the tourism industry, and drive down Jewish immigration.<sup>85</sup> Habash would say attacks on collaborators in particular helped produce “...cohesion in the surrounding masses”—similar to armed struggle, terrorism was a strategy meant to bring energy to the movement and build recruitment as much, if not more, as it was meant to achieve military goals.<sup>86</sup> Fatah accepted its cells targeting civilians inside Israel, but never ordered such attacks nor publicized them, fearing international reactions.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> PFLP, *Military Strategy of the PFLP*.

<sup>84</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 210.

<sup>85</sup> “Fateh: Birth and March, A Conversation with Kamal ’Udwan,” *Shu’un Filastiniyya* 17 (January 1973).

<sup>86</sup> Clovis Maksoud, ed., “George Habash, PFLP,” in *Palestine Lives; Interviews with Leaders of the Resistance*. (Beirut, Lebanon: Palestine Research Center and Kuwaiti Teachers Association, 1973).

<sup>87</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

The PFLP, meanwhile, began undertaking international operations, in particular airplane hijackings. These spectacular operations were at first relatively successful, as new recruits were attracted to the PFLP and veterans were re-energized. Leila Khaled notes, “When I stepped into the El-Al plane, I felt for the first time since April 13, 1948, that I was at home again in Haifa. I was indeed in a lion’s den. Never before had I felt so elated and proud of being a member of the Popular Front than at that moment.”<sup>88</sup> She called her hijackings, “a declaration of the humanity of Palestinians”, and felt, “the more spectacular the action, the better the morale of our people.”<sup>89</sup> In addition to airplane hijackings, the PFLP also conducted several bombings of Israeli targets abroad in the U.K., the Netherlands, and elsewhere. The goal of this terrorism was morale, as it was partially with insurgency, but also to send an international message that the Palestinians existed and had been wronged by Israel.<sup>90</sup> The gains in recruitment and the money paid by airlines to not have their planes hijacked were secondary but reinforced terrorism as a central component of PFLP strategy. More important was that their increase in prestige coincided with better relations with—and thereby more arms shipments and money from—the Chinese. Fatah was aloof to these operations until 1969 when Arafat publicly denounced them as counterproductive to their global political gains, in part due to international condemnation of the PFLP’s hijackings, particularly from the USSR.<sup>91</sup> These hijackings were a direct response to Karama: the PFLP needed to distinguish itself from Fatah to attract new recruits in the face of increasing Fatah hegemony.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*. 193.

<sup>89</sup> Khaled. 130, 114.

<sup>90</sup> Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography*.

<sup>91</sup> “Arafat: Fateh Rejects Airplane Hijacking,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 19, 1969.

<sup>92</sup> Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation*. 146.

Competition between the PFLP and Fatah over leadership of the Palestinian national movement was a central feature of their relationship. Their conflict would never engender violence between the two, however, because of a discourse of the importance of unity that pervades the Palestinian militias. As fragmentation produced serious challenges for Fatah, some members would argue for an “Algerian solution”, that is, forcibly integrating other militias into Fatah and violently destroying the remainder. Arafat remained steadfast against this:

We are a people of clans and extended families, and the method of [internal] violence went out with our Great Revolt of 1936-39. We found, after studying that experience, that this revolution will die if we follow the path of violence to determine its path.<sup>93</sup>

Arafat and Fatah certainly believed in unity due to studying Palestinian experience in the Great Revolt, but these ideas were in line with the information they were receiving at the time. Each Arab state had formed or supported various of the other militias and the PFLP itself rotated sponsors in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, making it politically dangerous for Fatah to take them on without making an international issue of it. Additionally, refugees were clear on this issue: they may support one group over another, but any group launching internal Palestinian violence would be ostracized. The PFLP felt much the same as Fatah, arguing that fragmentation among militias was the result of real differences among Palestinians that should be respected.<sup>94</sup>

And there were significant strategic disagreements between the two, driven by their different cultures. Fatah wanted to use Jordan and Lebanon as bases from which to attack Israel, accepting the problematic aspects of the political contexts and working to

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<sup>93</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 239.

<sup>94</sup> Maksoud, “George Habash, PFLP.”

negotiate stable arrangements with the governments even as it pushed the boundaries of their willingness to accept guerilla activity in their borders. Fatah's cultural preference for working with governments not only pushed them towards collaboration with these regimes, but also away from strategies that might threaten those relationships—e.g., international terrorism. The PFLP now believed that the Arab states, in particular Jordan, must be overthrown to create the “Arab Hanoi” that would be necessary for defeating Israel in the long term. The PFLP's anchored culture put them in touch with—at least, in their minds—the daily struggles of the Palestinian workers, which precluded any real alliance with the reactionary Jordanian government. It's difficult to know the extent to which the PFLP's beliefs reflected the reality of public opinion in Jordan at the time; regardless, they felt as if closeness with the Jordanians would be a liability with their constituency. The divide over whether to use Jordan and Lebanon as bases in collaboration with the existing regimes or radically remake them into revolutionary bases would be the primary strategic qualm between the PFLP and Fatah for the next five years.

As the Palestinian national movement developed a Palestinian national identity, Fatah and the PFLP formed their own organizational identities within it. Fatah had cemented itself as the leader of the movement by presenting an image of a unified, non-ideological national front with a zeal for armed action and a distinct lack of ideological or social program. The appeal of Fatah was in its ambiguity, an unspecific basis for action that helped restrengthen Palestinian pride. The PFLP's Leila Khaled, a Fatah volunteer in her youth, put it somewhat less generously:

[In Fatah], our sole function was fundraising. We were not a part of the policy-making processes, but merely spectators or ticket agents in the temple of Fatah. Periodically, nebulous lectures were given; speakers always remained within the realm of glittering generalities in dealing with the strategy, ideology, financing, and

recruiting of the movement... Fatah became a folksong, a fashion, a fetish.<sup>95</sup>

Lacking an ideology means, in practical terms, lacking a post-victory plan. Culturally, it means that the leaders are not seeking power to undertake a project of social change but rather seeking power for its own sake. For Fatah, liberating Palestine was not distinguishable from their own organizational success. The PFLP, though not deeply ideological, nonetheless contained within it a desire to improve the lives of Palestinians and Arabs; Habash was, after all, a pediatrician by trade, radicalized by dispossession in 1948 and having witnessed firsthand the physical and emotional toll it took on Palestinians and their children. It had set itself as the loyal opposition, known for daring acts of sabotage and hijacking as well as an instinctive populism in its leadership. They were ideological revolutionaries in the mold of the Viet Cong or the Chinese Communist Party, and they were not only out to defeat Israel, but to remake the Arab world in a social revolution. These identities selected out who would join each group and thereby reinforced the existing cultures.

As mentioned, Palestinian strategy from 1965-1970 was overdetermined to be insurgency, or at least violent—both social base and state sponsors were pushing for it. Terrorism was a logical next step to offset the capability gap between the militias and Israel. Critically, another model was available in the non-violent resistance taken up by communists and union activists inside occupied Palestine. But these were not the people Fatah and the PFLP drew from for recruits and political organizing was much easier in the camps where Arab governments mostly let them operate independently. Culturally, the PFLP was inclined to follow the strategic druthers of refugees who believed only

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<sup>95</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*. 107.

military force could achieve their goal of returning to Palestine; Fatah, though observing a similar dynamic in refugee communities, used violence because of the international Arab support for such a strategy as well as the enormously positive response to their victory at Karama. Therefore, the PFLP and Fatah essentially shared a violent strategy during this time, though the PFLP wielded more radical violence while Fatah was more restrained, differences driven by their different organizational cultures, in particular their embeddedness. But the changes in structure and opportunity coming in 1970 and onwards would see these different organizational cultures produce increasingly divergent strategies as Fatah sought to become an internationally recognized government-in-exile while the PFLP worked with various other groups to try and foment a social revolution in Jordan and later in Lebanon.

### **Black September and the Retreat to Lebanon, 1971 - 1975**

#### *Civil War in Jordan*

Jordan was always a contentious arena for Palestinians, who demographically accounted for more than half of Jordan's population.<sup>96</sup> This made the growing political power of the guerillas in Jordan a meaningful threat to the Hashemite monarchy, as they began to govern refugee camps and the left wing of the movement began publicly calling for the overthrow of the regime. The international military pressure on Jordan was mounting. Allowing guerilla activity was inciting Israeli reprisals, but attempts to rein in the Palestinian militias invited military threats from Syria to the North and Iraq to the East. Iraq already had a military force inside Jordan, which encouraged Palestinian

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<sup>96</sup> Luisa Gandolfo, *Palestinians in Jordan: The Politics of Identity* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

independent action; the Palestinian guerillas saw Iraq as their ally and therefore felt free to take action, relying on Iraqi entanglement if Jordan tried anything. The Palestinian hope of taking over Jordan was not impossible—but it was a much more distant prospect than the perpetually self-deluding Palestinian militias believed.

The first Jordanian attempts to shut down Palestinian military bases in early 1970 produced fierce resistance domestically and abroad, and sparked the PFLP and other left factions in the movement to radicalize their demands and strategy. The PFLP began forming popular councils and arming Palestinian civilians as Habash called for an offensive against the regime.<sup>97</sup> As clashes continued, the PFLP acted on this promise and seized two hotels in Amman, holding the foreign guests hostage to make the government appear weak and spark a wider offensive by other Palestinian forces. Meanwhile, Fatah balanced ceasefire overtures with rocket fire at the palace to deter attacks against them. The pressure on the government was obvious to the Palestinians as Arafat received two offers to take legitimate power in Jordan: from the Iraqis, who proposed a coup, and from the King himself, who offered Arafat the role of Prime Minister and freedom to form a government. Though he rejected both offers, Arafat agreed to a ceasefire premised on dismissing anti-Palestinian military commanders. The King then warned the Palestinians: “this is the last chance, after which there is no other.”<sup>98</sup>

Then, Nasser declared a ceasefire with Israel. Criticisms from the PFLP and Fatah led Nasser to not only cut ties with Fatah but also ship King Hussein weapons.<sup>99</sup> This development, tied with intelligence from military contacts that a Jordanian offensive was

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<sup>97</sup> PFLP, *The Proletariat and the Palestinian Revolution* (Beirut: al-Hadaf Books, 1970).

<sup>98</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 253.

<sup>99</sup> Sayigh. 254.

imminent, made action urgent. The PFLP began planning while Fatah resisted, arguing seizing power would only invite Israeli intervention. The new PFLP strategy was simple: instigate conflict to drag Palestinians and Fatah into open revolt and incite a split in the Jordanian army to overwhelm government forces with a united offensive. The first move to start this process was now a classic in the PFLP repertoire and a favorite of Wadi Haddad: airplane hijacking. The intent was to antagonize the ceasefire with Israel, re-enter Palestinian nationalism into the international media discourse, and create a broader mood of revolt that would stifle the Jordanian government and give the Palestinians an opportunity to strike.<sup>100</sup> At the beginning of September 1970, the PFLP undertook three airplane hijackings, landing the planes in Jordan and declaring the area liberated; they held Western and Jewish hostages to negotiate for the release of Palestinian prisoners, including Leila Khaled who was apprehended by the British while attempting to hijack a fourth plane.<sup>101</sup> Fatah immediately suspended PFLP membership in the PLO and demanded they release their hostages to the Jordanians.

Fatah's plan, meanwhile, was no plan. As Salah Khalaf would later note, Fatah had "defied Hussein's authority without seriously trying to seize his power."<sup>102</sup> This middle-of-the-road approach was premised on the dual beliefs that the Palestinian guerillas were strong enough to fight the regime and that Iraqi and Syrian support precluded their total elimination in Jordan.<sup>103</sup> Fatah was culturally disposed towards trusting its state sponsors, hoping its strength in conjunction with theirs would be a

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<sup>100</sup> *Al-Hadaf*, September 12, 1970.

<sup>101</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*. 80-90.

<sup>102</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 258.

<sup>103</sup> Sayigh.

deterrent. But when Hussein began forcing out militants in the south of Jordan and shelling refugee camps, Fatah's hand was forced. On September 11 they called for the overthrow of the Jordanian government and reinstated the PFLP to the PLO. The Jordanian regime then demanded all guerillas and their civilian militias surrender themselves and their weapons; to no one's surprise, they did not.

The Iraqis withdrew for fear of U.S. intervention and a surprising Syrian intervention was swiftly defeated by a combination of Jordanian air superiority and diplomatic pressure on Syria from the USSR.<sup>104</sup> The Palestinians were swiftly crushed by the Jordanian offensive, leading to an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire by the end of September. Hussein had gotten what he wanted and Arab pressure was rising, so he compromised from strength, producing a set of agreements that favored the monarchy. Over the course of the next year, these agreements would be abrogated and then reinstated, punctuated by government offensives, until the Palestinians were forced to fully withdraw. Their fighting strength was enormously diminished; the guerillas had approximately half the fighters they did at the beginning of 1970, with incalculable losses in weapons and prestige.<sup>105</sup>

Information during and after Black September was scarce and ambiguous. Events moved at a blistering pace, faster than any Palestinian militias could systematically consult international contacts or its refugee base. Thus, culture came to the fore, and Fatah and the PFLP showed their differences. The PFLP welcomed, and indeed tried to initiate, a conflict with the Jordanians. It was part and parcel to their goal of social

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<sup>104</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 85.

<sup>105</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 279.

revolution, and their commitment to this was evidenced by their decision to continue clandestine activities in Jordan even after their main force was exiled. But they also believed that the Iraqis would intervene, the military would split, and/or there would be a coup against King Hussein.<sup>106</sup> The PFLP's anchored culture led them to a strong belief in an incumbent social revolution that never came. This contrasts with Fatah, who waffled between indulging the Palestinian left's intentional provocations and negotiating with the Jordanian regime: even when offered multiple chances to seize or be granted political power, they balked. An Iraqi coup or joining Hussein's government would have left Fatah a secondary player and Palestine unliberated, and they were likely correct that the Israelis would have intervened as they did in Lebanon twelve years later. This is not to even mention the enormous military imbalance, made more difficult to fully perceive by the regime's rapid increase in strength through 1970 and the Palestinian's inflated numbers.<sup>107</sup> Fatah's floating organizational culture engendered a belief in their own ability to maneuver diplomatically through the crisis—this belief fell flat when it ran into the fact of power.

The weakness in tactical information—which would have displayed acutely relative Palestinian weakness—contrasted the strong social and international signals to continue armed action. Fatah and the PFLP were both subject to six months of acute uncertainty, the first time they had been forced to deal directly with such rapid developments, and they were completely unprepared. Battle plans had been drawn up but were rejected or ignored as Fatah tried to prevent conflict and the PFLP tried to start it,

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<sup>106</sup> *Al-Hadaf*, September 14, 1970.

<sup>107</sup> El-Edroos, *The Hashemite Arab Army 1908-1979*. 449-450.

neither thinking they would actually do much fighting. Both groups, having dynamic organizational cultures, experimented through the course of this uncertainty—the PFLP with civilian militias and expanded hijackings, Fatah with rocket attacks, followed by a diplomatic push, followed again by joining the PFLP’s anti-regime insurgency. If the Palestinian guerillas had a unified strategy that they committed to, whether confrontational or non-confrontational, they likely would have fared better; but it was their different organizational cultures that produced different strategies, as well as overly-fluid strategy, that made them so singularly ineffective.

### *Strategic Reflection after Black September*

There was plenty of blame to go around after the final defeat in Jordan. How that blame was apportioned by Fatah and the PFLP is telling, if not surprising: they denied responsibility while blaming the other for causing the failure. The PFLP felt that it had been vindicated by the Jordanian offensive. Concessions and negotiation with the Jordanians had only encouraged them to push harder against the Palestinians; had they from the outset been unified in overthrowing the regime, they could have won.<sup>108</sup> Thus, for the PFLP, the blame fell on Fatah for its reticence to fight the Jordanian monarchy. This position is best expressed in the irony of a 1973 interview with Habash, in which he says about Black September,

Without radical and scientific reconsideration and criticism, we cannot be confident about the progress of the revolution...[Palestinian] leadership must therefore unflinchingly accept the responsibility for what happened, and any attempt to evade this will do the revolution no good. To do so would indeed

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<sup>108</sup> Galia, *George Habash, a Political Biography*.

be very dangerous, for the resistance movement would then continue to suffer from the ills of the past.<sup>109</sup>

Mere moments later, he would say, “We, the [PFLP], do not accept in any shape or form the responsibility for what happened.”<sup>110</sup> The PFLP’s apparently ironic position was scientific reconsideration and criticism for thee, but not for me. Overall, the lesson for the PFLP was they should have pushed even harder than they did to overthrow the Jordanian regime. So, the PFLP went underground in Jordan and continued a low-grade insurgency against the monarchy; it failed within a year. To be fair to the PFLP, there was not an obvious reason to abandon insurgency altogether. Though they had suffered enormous material losses in a tactical disaster, this was no different than before—and their reticence to risk confrontation had cost them dearly in credibility with their base at Karama.

But Black September did force the issue of airplane hijackings to the fore, especially as Haddad was suspected of working with Iraqi and Egyptian intelligence without the knowledge of the rest of the PFLP central committee.<sup>111</sup> External operations had expanded to include attacks on pipelines and refineries in an attempt to use Middle Eastern oil as a weapon against Western forces. In a fascinating complex of compartmentalization, Haddad and Habash ended up on opposite sides of the hijacking issue, both in part due to information from the USSR. Habash was in Moscow when the September 1970 hijackings happened, and the Soviets canceled their meetings with him in protest, pressuring him to end hijackings. But since 1968, Haddad had been secretly working with the KGB and informing them of his hijacking operations. Because of

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<sup>109</sup> Maksoud, “George Habash, PFLP.”

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 300.

Moscow's public opposition to terrorism, this support was kept secret.<sup>112</sup> It perhaps explains why Habash agreed to reinstate hijackings in 1971, approvingly citing Soviet policy just 11 months after blaming it for his opposition.<sup>113</sup>

Hijackings had been mostly tactically successful. They had theoretically netted a significant amount of profit—though where that profit had gone was part of the criticism of Haddad—and gained notoriety and publicity in the Western press.<sup>114</sup> But Haddad's expanding targets were too much for the rest of the PFLP leadership, and by 1972 Haddad had been expelled and hijackings disavowed. Tellingly, Habash would postdate this decision to 1970 when he announced it in 1972, claiming it had detracted from building a proletariat organization.<sup>115</sup> This is in line with the PFLP's broader doubling down on social revolution: international work helped to spur recruiting, but did little to build a functional organization that could clandestinely overthrow a government.<sup>116</sup>

Fatah accepted on some level that it had been a mistake to trust the Jordanians. Arafat said in a 1971 interview that they had fallen, "into the trap of Arab political appeasement, based on the illusion that coexistence with the Jordanian regime was possible."<sup>117</sup> Despite this, Arafat placed blame squarely on the shoulders of the PFLP, arguing they had sparked an unnecessary conflict by attacking Jordanian soldiers, allowing undisciplined street action, and hijacking airplanes to take hostages.<sup>118</sup> Though

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<sup>112</sup> 3 APRIL 1974 (1071-A/OV) HADDAD, "KGB memorandum. ANDROPOV to BREZHNEV about meeting between KGB station chief in Lebanon and Wadie HADDAD, leader of the PFLP-EO (People's Liberation Front of Palestine – External Operations).," April 23, 1974.

<sup>113</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*.

<sup>114</sup> Robert T. Holden, "The Contagiousness of Aircraft Hijacking," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 4 (1986): 874–904.

<sup>115</sup> Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation*. 148.

<sup>116</sup> Cobban. 149.

<sup>117</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 285.

<sup>118</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 86.

this is somewhat contradictory to his admission that coexistence with the Jordanian regime was impossible, their strategic takeaway was they needed to better manage relations with Arab hosts rather than from the outset try to overthrow them. But eventually Black September was not even referenced as a failure: the victory, Arafat would claim, is that they survived and had not given up armed struggle.<sup>119</sup> The immediate failure of Fatah's attempt to launch an insurrection and sabotage campaign in Jordan punctuated this claim. But Fatah, despite deploying rhetoric to insinuate strength and a continuing victory, did feel there needed to be a strategic change. They needed to regain the initiative and momentum with escalation and refocus attention on Palestinian nationalism rather than intra-Arab struggle. After 1970, uncertainty persisted, and as was its cultural preference, Fatah sought to try new strategies. This change would come in the form of the Black September Organization (BSO).

Though somewhat unclear the degree of separation between the two, I treat BSO as a wing of Fatah centrally because it consisted mostly of Fatah militants, there is a plausible timeline for its formal establishment at a Fatah congress in Damascus, its actions were universally praised by Fatah leadership, and interviewed Fatah officials denied the possibility that these actions would have been taken without Arafat's knowledge and at least tacit approval.<sup>120</sup> The shift to international terrorism was both an emulation of the PFLP's successful self-insertion onto the world stage and a way to reassert Palestinian power after the loss in Jordan. It also represented what would be a persistent strategic shift: the inclusion of American influence on Israel and American

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<sup>119</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 285.

<sup>120</sup> Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York, 2001). 379-383.; Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

imperialism as stated targets. BSO's first action, the assassination of Jordanian prime minister Wasfi al-Tal, boosted Palestinian morale and engendered excited letters from prospective Palestinian recruits rejoicing that they were being noticed on the international scene and begging to join the BSO.<sup>121</sup> The Palestinian refugee community was showing the militias, yet again, that they wanted action above all else: and BSO would give it to them. The infamous BSO attack in Munich—wherein militants attempted to take Israeli athletes hostage, culminating in a bloody airport shootout—was lauded by Fatah leadership, even as Israeli reprisals killed hundreds.<sup>122</sup> Fatah's support was later admitted by Salah Khalaf to seem counterintuitive, but—in English and for a Western audience—he laid out a narrative justifying the attack as intended to be a hostage-taking without casualties that the Israelis had intransigently ruined.<sup>123</sup> BSO would undertake two more attacks in 1973—one failed attempt to kill a US ambassador in Jordan, and one successful attempt to kill a US ambassador in Khartoum.

Israeli reprisals and international condemnation of terrorism took their toll, however. Israeli car and letter bombs had been taking their toll among Palestinian leaders, both Fatah and PFLP. Additionally, Israeli attacks against Syria drove the Syrian regime to restrict Palestinian action on their border. Palestinian public opinion, reacting to these developments, had also begun to sour on terrorism.<sup>124</sup> Arafat was actively courting international favor in the Non-Aligned Movement and terrorism was now a serious liability. Represented, respectively, by Khalaf and Haddad, both groups would

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<sup>121</sup> Aburish, *Arafat*.

<sup>122</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 106.

<sup>123</sup> Iyad and Rouleau. 110.

<sup>124</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 309-312.

seek to rein in their external operations. The PFLP did so in response to shifting social information as Palestinian refugees began to feel international terrorism was not worth the Israeli reprisals, as refugees in Lebanon were more concerned with the encroaching threat of internecine violence as well as extreme and increasing poverty in the camps.<sup>125</sup> Palestinian civilians were deeply involved in the formation of strategy for the PFLP. An oft-repeated aphorism about Palestinians in the Lebanese camps is their collective obsession with politics. Across interviews, ethnographies, and autobiographies alike, the phrase “every Palestinian is a politician, every Palestinian is a strategist” or something of that ilk was nearly universal, especially from material affiliated with the PFLP. Fatah took similar action to move away from terrorism because it was receiving interorganizational information from new potential Non-Aligned state sponsors and allies that such a strategy was unacceptable. As with the onset of Palestinian international terrorism, the similar strategic changes for the PFLP and Fatah were driven by different logics, the differences a result of their diametrically opposed cultural embeddedness.

Generally, the period between 1970 and 1973 was marked by continuous uncertainty and contradictory information. International blocs and their relationship to the Palestinians were shifting quickly, even more so as Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Libya were all experiencing, to various degrees, regime changes. Moreover, these regime changes were frequently connected to relations with the Palestinians— Assad, at least, was able to take power in part because of the embarrassing Syrian failure to contest Jordan during Black September, an intervention which he had opposed.<sup>126</sup> The larger international scene was

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<sup>125</sup> Zeina Halabi, “Exclusion and Identity in Lebanon’s Palestinian Refugee Camps: A Story of Sustained Conflict,” *Environment & Urbanization* 16, no. 2 (October 2004).

<sup>126</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 265.

no better—the ongoing Sino-Soviet split and the 1972 Chinese rapprochement with the United States pushed the Palestinians towards tighter relations with the Soviets even as they had their attention focused more on Vietnam and Angola.

The broad uncertainty of the early 1970s produced eclectic strategy and made culture the central cause of action. Both Fatah and the PFLP waffled between using and disavowing terrorism, both attempted and then gave up on re-entering the Jordanian arena, and both were essentially forced to stop raids on Israel by the cooperative efforts of the Syrian and Lebanese governments. Their experimentation was due to their cultural reactivity; their varied embeddedness drove different points of focus as Fatah tried to make diplomatic inroads with the Non-Aligned Movement and the PFLP launched a clandestine guerilla war in Jordan. Nonetheless, the severe restrictions on conflict with Israel imposed by the Arab states meant that not only was social and interorganizational information unavailable, but tactical feedback was also gone. All the Palestinian militias could do successfully for these years was build capacity in the camps, which required broadening recruitment in Lebanon and securing their political position in Lebanon. Both meant engaging deeper in Lebanese politics, which rapidly became a strategic albatross.

### *The October War and Strategic Change*

As mentioned, by the end of 1973 Palestinian underground action in Jordan had been stamped out and the Syrian regime decided to curtail guerilla action on its border, leaving Lebanon as the only remaining base that shared a border with Israel. The PLO quickly set up in the camps by 1972, and they brought along their weapons and institutions to essentially govern Palestinian refugees in lieu of the Lebanese state. The

1969 Cairo Agreement had given them rights to govern and recruit from the camps, in a compromise that allowed Palestinians to stay but prevented them from upsetting the demographic balance on which Lebanese political stability was based. But Israeli reprisals in Lebanon turned the Maronite-dominated government against the PLO, leading to low-level conflict in May 1973.<sup>127</sup> Arafat, acting as head of the PLO, was able to resolve this conflict by promising to restrict guerilla action on the border, but asserted that the guerillas would not reduce their military presence or compromise on the terms of the Cairo Agreement. Though Fatah had learned their lessons from Jordan and were anxious to maintain good relations, they also recognized the danger of letting their guard down; besides, the Lebanese were under pressure from Iraq, Syria, and Egypt to stick to the Cairo Agreement, so Arafat correctly assumed they had some room to maneuver.<sup>128</sup> The PFLP, however, saw this as a betrayal and began attacking Lebanese military positions. They had already begun forging relationships with other leftist forces in Lebanon, just as the PLO and Fatah were also beginning to give military assistance to their own allies in Lebanon—though most of these allies were shared between the two. But this conflict was not to be the main event in 1973: war was brewing in Syria and Egypt.

In October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a war against Israel. The result was a stalemate, but the Arab coalition had shown that they presented a serious military threat; Israel even mobilized their nuclear capabilities, which in turn scared the Americans into

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<sup>127</sup> Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, First edition (University of California Press, 1990). 198.

<sup>128</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 315.

resupplying them enough to push back the Arab offensive.<sup>129</sup> The specific details of the war are unimportant; the resolution of the war produced one of the largest strategic shocks the Palestinians had yet faced. The most immediate result was Arab recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative body for Palestinians, much to Jordan's chagrin, as a reward for their minor role in the 1973 war raiding northern Israel from Lebanon.<sup>130</sup>

But the Arab solidarity that produced this decision and the military effort of 1973 was quickly crumbling due to deft U.S. diplomatic maneuvering. Soon after the war, it was clear that the Arab states were divided into a pro-U.S. camp, a pro-Soviet camp, and a rejectionist camp. The PFLP, resisting the ceasefire against Israel and the desire of both pro-Soviet Syria and increasingly pro-U.S. Egypt to obtain a permanent settlement with Israel, aligned with rejectionist Iraq and Libya. Fatah, meanwhile, was outwardly supporting Syria, but privately seeking to negotiate with Israel independently. This was a recognition that Arab diplomacy was, at the moment, strong—the OPEC oil embargo had devastated Western oil prices and the war with Israel had displayed Arab military strength, which could now be converted into diplomatic gains. Moreover, Fatah feared that this newfound diplomatic heft would be lent instead to helping the Jordanians lay claim to the West Bank and supplant the PLO as a representative of the Palestinians. As ever, Fatah was keyed in on the interorganizational information above all else: following the twists and turns of international diplomacy with keen interest despite no popular appetite for a negotiated settlement with Israel.

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<sup>129</sup> Avner Cohen, "The Last Nuclear Moment," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2003, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/06/opinion/the-last-nuclear-moment.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 332.

The 1973 war convinced Fatah that the international structure was ripe for negotiation with Israel towards establishing a government in the occupied territories.<sup>131</sup> Arafat was heartened by a 1974 U.S. and Soviet statement recognizing the Palestinians as having rights in the conflict; though publicly aligned with the Soviet bloc, Arafat saw the Egyptian shift towards U.S. sponsorship and sent secret messages to Kissinger indicating a willingness to negotiate with Israel and concede coexistence with them.<sup>132</sup> In fact, it was from this point onward that Arafat would see the U.S. as the central crux on which a negotiated settlement rested, saying privately, “The U.S. holds the key to Israel.”<sup>133</sup> The U.S. rearmament of Israel during the October War had convinced Arafat that the war could not be won regionally and militarily, and therefore must be fought internationally and diplomatically.

But Palestinian refugees, still Fatah’s source for recruitment, nearly universally rejected negotiation as capitulation, not only for recognizing Israel but also for giving up the armed struggle that had become central to Palestinian identity. Nonetheless in 1974 the PLO codified their new policy: their explicit goal was now to establish a national authority in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>134</sup> How this goal would be achieved was left intentionally vague to preserve the language of armed struggle, but the PFLP at least recognized this almost certainly meant negotiating with Israel. Soviet support for Fatah came alongside insistence they consider less agitation and more diplomacy.<sup>135</sup> Fatah’s

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<sup>131</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

<sup>132</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1982). 626.

<sup>133</sup> Andrew Gowers and Tony Walker, *Behind the Myth: Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Revolution* (New York: Interlink Pub Group Inc, 1991). 213.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

<sup>134</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, January 31, 1974.

<sup>135</sup> al-Wazir, *Fateh: Genesis, Rise, Evolution, Legitimate Representative—Beginnings Part One*. 86.

cultural pragmatism and attentiveness to international power led them to the conclusion that liberating all of Palestine in one fell swoop would be impossible. Instead, they could establish an authority in the West Bank and Gaza through negotiation and use that as a launching pad for an eventual full liberation of Palestine, in line with the interorganizational information they were gathering.<sup>136</sup> Fatah's diplomatic push was abetted by two consequent developments: an Arab summit that recognized the PLO and Arafat's subsequent invitation to speak to the United Nations General Assembly. The former gave certitude to Arafat, who then spoke with confidence at the U.N. about the possibility for peace. Palestinians were given formal observer status at the U.N., and the reaction from most Palestinians was jubilant, especially in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>137</sup> This outpouring of support encouraged Fatah's new negotiation strategy in the same way support after Karama encouraged insurgency.

Observing the same conditions, the PFLP had the opposite strategic reaction as Fatah. They left the PLO after Fatah issued a joint statement with Egypt and Syria implying the PLO would accept a deal giving them authority over the West Bank. Aligning with Libya and Iraq, they formed a coalition of rejectionist groups to attempt to spoil PLO attempts at diplomacy. But their ongoing attempts at insurgency and terrorism in the occupied territories and Jordan produced no results, failing completely by 1975. They shifted to more regional terrorism as a way of drawing political lines against the conservative U.S.-aligned Arab states among Palestinians—this would compete with Fatah, who took Gulf aid without complaint, and drive recruitment away from Fatah

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<sup>136</sup> Khalid al-Hasan, *A Critical Reading of Three Initiatives: The Brezhnev Initiative, the Prince Fahd Initiative, the Reagan Initiative*, Samid Al-Iqtisadi 16 (Amman, 1986). 41-43.

<sup>137</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 147.

towards the PFLP.<sup>138</sup> The PFLP paused their insurgency strategy at this time, however. Fatah and the PFLP had the same information—that the U.S. was the core of Israel’s resilience—and from that information took diametrically opposed positions. The PFLP believed that the Palestinian refugee base still wanted military action. PFLP members, including Leila Khaled, had been traveling the Gulf to fundraise and liaise with aligned political groups; there they heard unified anger from workers and Palestinian emigres at U.S. imperialism as represented by the re-arming of Israel in 1973.<sup>139</sup> This social information, preferred by the anchored PFLP, blinded them to the impossibility of winning an armed struggle against Israel so long as they were converting Palestinian rage into action.

The Fatah attitude towards the PFLP, and indeed Fatah’s whole reasonable culture, is neatly represented in an anecdote provided by Abu Iyad. Called in to handle negotiations with Palestinian airplane hijackers in Tunis in 1975, Abu Iyad describes how he used interpersonal trust and appeals to nationalism to secure the release of the hostages and the respect of the Tunisian authorities and British airline executives. The British airline was even kind enough to send him flowers as a thank you. After successfully convincing the hijackers to back down, and to drop the demand that the PLO withdraw from the UN, he spoke with them frankly and described the content of and prideful reaction to Arafat’s speech. As Abu Iyad tells it, notably in English and for a Western audience, he debated the hijackers until he successfully convinced them that they had been “blind” to criticize Arafat and subsequently they all joined Fatah. Their radicalism,

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<sup>138</sup> Harold M. Cubert, *The PFLP’s Changing Role in the Middle East*. 136-137.

<sup>139</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*. 173.

Abu Iyad claimed, was due to the manipulation of the rejectionists, in particular the PFLP who were “demagogic propagandists” who could dangerously influence young Palestinians if the “realists” could not give them “objective” analysis.<sup>140</sup> The credulity of the account is questionable even just on the basis that it reads like a self-indulgent and haughty fantasy, but even if every word is false it speaks to a truth about Fatah: in their view, the opposition, and in fact anyone who opposed Fatah, were childish and irrational, adventuring selfishly while Fatah did the real work of navigating international realities and power.

Fatah was making gains in the occupied territories; American and Israeli intransigence on negotiations left significant uncertainty on how to proceed, and predictably the dynamic Fatah chose to take a new approach. Fatah’s new negotiation strategy required that the PLO be recognized as representing the Palestinian people, which in turn meant for Fatah that they display the ability to spoil any peace deal that excluded them, and thus Fatah began to abet its central negotiation strategy with terrorism inside Israel. Fatah leadership saw the failure of Kissinger to secure a deal during a visit to Israel marked by multiple Fatah terrorist attacks as evidence that they could support their diplomatic strategy militarily.<sup>141</sup> Their re-entrance into military action in the West Bank and Gaza was, like many of their previous campaigns, a strategic success wrapped in tactical failure. The newly rebuilt clandestine organization was torn apart by Israeli security pressure, but Fatah nonetheless gained prestige as their armed actions accounted for most Palestinian attacks in the occupied territories. Showing their

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<sup>140</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 151-153.

<sup>141</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 356.

presence was more important than causing damage as they attempted to earn the respect of West Bank and Gazan Palestinians—less in the interest of political proselytization and more in the interest of diplomatic leverage.<sup>142</sup> This also meant part of their political program was an insistence that the PLO is the only legitimate representative of Palestinians—an issue that would become critical for Fatah as alternative leadership arose organically in the West Bank.

This period also marked the end of Fatah’s use of terrorism as a deliberate strategy. The Savoy Hotel attack in March 1975, in which Fatah operatives took international hostages in a Tel Aviv hotel, resulted in the deaths of several hostages and all the assailants. Their alleged goal was to interject Palestinian issues into Israeli-Egyptian negotiations.<sup>143</sup> Fatah had stopped using international terrorism to appease prospective state allies in the Non-Aligned Movement, but as they began to articulate and pursue negotiations as their central strategy, these kinds of attacks on Israel increasingly became a liability. Interorganizational information had ended their international terrorism, but it was the tactical feedback from the Savoy Hotel attack—specifically its ineffectiveness in impacting negotiations with Egypt or eliciting a response from the Americans as sponsors of the negotiation—was the nail in the coffin for Fatah’s strategic targeting of civilians.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Sayigh. 350.

<sup>143</sup> “The Savoy Attack,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 4, no. 4 (1975): 127–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535610>.

<sup>144</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

### Strategy 1965 – 1975

Palestinian strategy and strategic change between 1965 and 1975 were powerfully determined by the organizational cultures of Fatah and the PFLP. Insurgent organizational culture theory predicts that the PFLP will prioritize social information and Fatah interorganizational information, even when their preferred type of information is not clearly signifying a strategic direction. Additionally, both groups are expected to change strategies or experiment with new strategic ideas when information is weak. Tactical information plays the strongest role in this, as weak tactical information vastly widens the imagined scope of action for highly reactive groups.

Fatah pursued an insurgency against Israel for the entirety of this period, 1965 – 1975. This strategy was initiated as an experiment under uncertainty: independent Palestinian action was, before 1967, a significant but not yet a consensus position among Palestinian refugees, many of whom still expected Israel to be defeated by the Arab states. Others still favored the communist approach of contending for Palestinian and worker's rights within the Israeli institutional context.<sup>145</sup> The PFLP followed suit only after it became abundantly clear that Fatah's strategy was garnering significant social support. As predicted, Fatah's dynamic culture drove it to experiment when faced with uncertainty, while the anchored culture of the PFLP drove them to follow suit when social information began to clearly indicate broad support for independent Palestinian militancy. The PFLP would also continue their insurgency for this entire period.

Both the PFLP and Fatah also used terrorism during this time, though the PFLP did so more frequently. Both, as expected under uncertainty for the two culturally

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<sup>145</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 83, 99.

dynamic organizations, began as experiments: the PFLP needed a way to outflank Fatah after the embarrassment at Karama and display their militant credentials, and without a clear way to do so, they innovated the tactic of airplane hijacking, probably learned from observing the tactic's use by Cuban militants, though no such connection has ever been admitted by PFLP hijackers. For Fatah, though they had accepted low level of terrorism in 1968 and 1969, their expulsion from Jordan left them militarily weakened and humiliated, and international terrorism in the PFLP's mold seemed to be a way to project strength at low cost. This was a gamble, as Fatah had recognized and criticized the PFLP's international terrorism as unnecessarily risky and leading directly to the Black September debacle. Both groups pursued terrorism as a new strategy when uncertainty reigned, but only Fatah ended the strategy when interorganizational pushed against it and, later, tactical information convinced them it was ineffective, especially as they began to pursue negotiations. The PFLP was more concerned with popularity among refugees who they believed supported and were galvanized by international terrorism, while Fatah was more concerned with expanding its international influence, both preferences a result of their distinct organizational cultures.

Lastly, and most important, is Fatah's shift to a negotiation strategy. After the 1973 war, interorganizational information was clear, and the entire region could observe the shifting blocs. In particular, Egypt's realignment away from the Soviets and towards the Americans and peace with Israel was recognized widely, including Fatah. While the PFLP followed the structures of social information coming out of the Palestinian refugee communities who wanted an insurgency until total victory, Fatah followed the facts of international power to the logical conclusion that Israel would never be militarily

defeated. The U.S. would never allow it, and without Egyptian support in a war effort it was likely not possible. Thus, instead of insurgency until victory, new interorganizational information convinced Fatah that the best strategy was building pressure via insurgency and then converting that pressure into bargaining leverage for an eventual negotiated settlement. It's notable that the PFLP also observed the power of U.S. support for Israel, but instead of taking that as an impetus to negotiate, they began to intentionally expand their targeting to perceived U.S. interests while calling out a nexus of international imperialism in the U.S., Israel, and the Arab Gulf states.

Fatah went through four strategic changes: starting insurgency, starting negotiation, starting, and then ending, terrorism. Two of these four changes were driven by experimentation under uncertainty, as predicted by their dynamic culture. The other two were driven mostly by interorganizational information, as predicted by their floating culture. The PFLP only went through two strategic changes, starting both insurgency and terrorism: both were launched as experiments under uncertainty, and both were sustained by strong social information that clearly indicated Palestinian support for their strategy. They were not more popular than Fatah, certainly, but Fatah at this time was still pursuing insurgency and not publicly pushing negotiation with Israel, so the strategic druthers of Palestinians were not necessarily reflected in their factional support.

Whenever information was vague or contradictory, both groups opted to change strategies due to their high reactivity; to which strategies they changed was determined by the alignment of social and interorganizational information and each group's respective embeddedness, effects which were stronger in weak information environments. The refugee community pushed armed struggle to reclaim a stolen dignity

and with the knowledge that any non-military option would leave them out since they had no meaningful leverage, and so the anchored PFLP could not abandon the gun.

Meanwhile, the floating Fatah was happy to do so the moment it seemed a negotiated settlement was within reach and desired by its international sponsors—though nonetheless alert to the mood within the camps and therefore reticent to state this new thinking outright. As civil war exploded in Lebanon, these cultural divides would produce even deeper strategic divides.

### **The Palestinian National Movement: Lebanon**

Fatah and the PFLP faced new strategic challenges in Lebanon, and their evolving responses to these challenges were driven by their organizational cultures. The two central and interconnected strategic challenges they faced were how to maintain military pressure on Israel while increasingly embroiled in intra-Lebanese conflict. Their responses were rooted in their organizational culture and the divergent, culturally-informed lessons of Black September. Fatah sought to appease forces opposed to the Palestinian presence, namely the Maronites; the PFLP, on the other hand, leaned into the civil war, joining with Lebanese leftist forces to try and remake Lebanon into a revolutionary state from which to launch an anti-Israel insurgency. Fatah's floating culture prioritized interorganizational information and international legitimacy, such that negotiating with the Maronites and Syria seemed the rational approach. The PFLP's anchored culture prioritized social information and popular legitimacy among the Palestinian refugee community, which between 1975 and 1985 was under near-constant assault from right-wing (and later, Syrian-backed) forces. For the PFLP, defeating these anti-Palestinian forces was paramount; for Fatah, managing a fraught relationship was preferable to perpetual conflict.

This chapter advances the theoretical goal of the last chapter in showing how differences in embeddedness lead to divergent strategies, but also accomplishes two other critical theoretical objectives. First, though the previous chapter touched on the dynamics of reactivity, in Lebanon both organizations show their reaction to uncertainty is strategic change. But these years also display that while reactivity drives repeated change, often

cultural differences mean these are justified differently and change in different directions. Strategy can converge on a unified position for completely independent reasons, as the PFLP and Fatah will show repeatedly. Second, the importance of iteration becomes clearer as time progresses. It's critical that these strategic paths are laid out chronologically because strategic iteration can powerfully constrain strategic choice such that cultural preferences, even in dynamic organizations, produce strategic inertia. Reactivity will produce changes in approach and methods even as overarching strategy persists—when previous strategy limits options, dynamic organizations will often show a strategic oscillation, flitting back and forth between a handful of approaches and strategies regardless of their success or failure.

Fatah and the PFLP share dynamic organizational cultures; between 1975 and 1985, there were several moments of acute uncertainty, and in each of these both groups sought new approaches to fighting Israel. The deepest uncertainty, following their 1982 expulsion from Lebanon, led to the greatest strategic change—the shift away from armed struggle and towards civil resistance. Both groups also ended their use of terrorism during this time in response to tactical failures, but it was in part their dynamic cultures that allowed them to absorb the tactical information and pivot. This shift is a result of culture as well as military calculation because of the difficulty of ending terrorism once starting—terrorism often sustains itself as a strategy on inertia due to issues of confirmation bias.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sprinzak, "Chapter 5"; Laitin and Shapiro, "The Political, Economic, and Organizational Sources of Terrorism," February 2008.

Figure 6: Fatah Strategy: 1975 – 1987

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	1980 – 1980	1980 Hebron Attack (5/2/80)	Experimentation under uncertainty	Strong tactical information
<i>Insurgency</i>	(1965) – 1985	Israeli invasion of Lebanon (6/6/82)	(Experimentation under uncertainty)	Strong interorganizational and tactical information
<i>Negotiation</i>	(1974) –	Attempts at inclusion in 1978 Camp David Accords	(Strong inter-organizational information)	N/A [Persistent belief that military victory is impossible, negotiation only potentially successful strategy]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	1982 –	Competition for control of unions and professional associations in OPT	Experimentation under uncertainty	N/A [Need for international legitimacy for negotiation precludes violence, but need some way to exert pressure for negotiations]

Figure 7: PFLP Strategy: 1975 – 1987

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	(1972) – 1976	Entebbe Hijacking (7/4/1976)	(Experimentation under uncertainty)	Strong tactical information
<i>Insurgency</i>	(1967) –	Israeli invasion of Lebanon (6/6/82)	(Strong social information)	N/A [persisted due to popular belief in primacy of “armed struggle” as strategy]
<i>Negotiation</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strong belief non-violence could not open Israel to refugees of ‘48]	N/A [Responders locate power in people, not international diplomacy/prestige; competition with pro-negotiation Fatah]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	1979 –	PFLP-organized youth groups and unions begin appearing in OPT	Experimentation under uncertainty	N/A [Distancing from theater of combat left few alternatives]

### The Lebanese Civil War and the New Plan, 1975 - 1977

#### *Another Black September?*

The primary point of contention between the Lebanese government and the Palestinian militias was much the same as it was in Jordan. Fatah and the PFLP wanted freedom to operate on the Israeli border, control over the camps so that they could recruit and build their organizational capacities, and permission to import military equipment to fortify their positions in the camps and on the border. But identical goals hid deep strategic differences. Fatah was increasing its strength so it could project power for negotiation leverage, prodding Israel with raids while indicating they would give up

armed struggle in return for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. The PFLP was increasing its strength as well, but with the full intention of wielding it for purely military purposes; they hoped not only to use raids to galvanize and radicalize Palestinians into taking up arms in a mass revolt, but also to fight alongside leftist forces in Lebanon to remake it into a revolutionary base from which to plan and support the imagined insurgency inside Israel.

This divergence is a result of two factors: the experience in Jordan firstly, but more importantly Fatah and the PFLP's different organizational cultures. Their interpretations of Black September were themselves rooted in organizational culture, and the groups' strategies became more and more different as their iterative strategic analyses branched further and further apart. The PFLP's anchored culture, and resultant preference for social information, caused them to see Black September as a failure to fully commit to a revolution and insurgency in Jordan. They'd felt they were close in Jordan and had garnered support on that basis, and the rising tensions in Lebanon were a second chance.<sup>2</sup> Fatah, meanwhile, saw Black September as a diplomatic failure due to their floating culture and associated preference for interorganizational information. What was needed in Lebanon, for Fatah, was a more conciliatory and managed approach that could permit them to raid Israel—both to boost recruitment and secure negotiation leverage—without destabilizing the country or sparking conflict with the Lebanese state or the Maronite sect that controlled it.<sup>3</sup> Both had dynamic cultures, and the uncertainty of the Lebanese arena thereby caused them both to seek novel tactical approaches to their strategies.

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<sup>2</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official C.

The Lebanese government, for its part, was upset by constant and brutal Israeli reprisals, feared the social revolution that the PFLP was actively pursuing alongside other burgeoning leftist forces in Lebanon, and wanted to maintain military superiority over the Palestinians. Increasingly, these issues became linked with the ever-present sectarian tensions in Lebanon. Palestinians were Sunni Muslims and represented a significant demographic advantage over the politically dominant Maronite Christians, and the predominantly Maronite regime was also facing a challenge from disenfranchised and destitute Shiite Muslims in the South, the primary victims of Israeli reprisals. The Shiites had developed into a powerful political movement pushing for their political and economic rights in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Jordanian monarchy who wanted to absorb Palestinian refugees, the Lebanese government shared with the fedayeen the hope of Palestinian refugees returning to their homes. However, the factions in the Lebanese government differed widely on why exactly they shared that dream—and what the next best choice was if it proved impossible. Alongside the PFLP, Lebanese elites feared that Fatah's plans to govern a West Bank and Gaza statelet would leave refugees in the camps, thereby making permanent the demographic changes that contradicted Lebanon's Maronite-dominated confessional institutions. The Palestinians had entered an arena far more politically and ethnically unstable than Jordan—and their very presence in Jordan had destabilized the country to the point of civil war. All sides, knowing this and holding the 1958 civil war in Lebanon in their recent memory, were alert to the danger of a conflict. Attempts to prevent this conflict were married to and marred by attempts to pre-

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<sup>4</sup> Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*.

empt it, ending the same way as it did in Jordan: violent conflict between the Palestinian militias and their hosts.

The first shots of the Lebanese Civil War were fired by the Lebanese military, but not at Palestinians; rather, they shot at protesting fishers fighting for economic rights. The army killed a popular opposition leader, and in response armed protestors pushed the army out of Beirut's old city with help from Palestinian refugees living in the nearby camp. The Maronite rightists of the Phalange Party were blamed for the military's action, and unidentified gunmen attacked a Maronite leader's church the next day, leading in turn to a Phalangist revenge attack against a bus of Palestinians that killed 26 people.<sup>5</sup> This attack outraged the Arab world as the Phalangists decried the Lebanese state permitting the PLO to take root in Lebanon and the Lebanese opposition were joined by the PLO in calling for the dissolution and isolation of the Phalange Party and its ministers. This was red meat for the PFLP, whose strategy was rooted in displacing Maronite political power in a popular revolt led by a Palestinian-left Lebanese alliance.

Fatah was not pleased with this outcome, evidenced by Arafat's quick move to undermine it by negotiating with the Phalangists. Arafat and the Fatah leadership knew Lebanese stability was key: they needed a base nearby Israel to keep up military pressure to support their new strategy of negotiation, and they knew the U.S. was actively trying to sideline them in favor of Jordan for a final settlement of the Palestine issue, making the first problem even more dire. It was also uncovered that Israel was shipping arms to the Maronite militias, adding to the Lebanese left's claims that they were stooges of the imperialist West.<sup>6</sup> Black September was still fresh in the minds of Fatah, and Arafat was

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<sup>5</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 360-361.

<sup>6</sup> Sayigh. 364

thereby dedicated to both building defenses to secure the base in Lebanon while reassuring the Maronite militias and Lebanese government that Palestinians would not interfere in Lebanese domestic issues. Fatah's cultural penchant for interorganizational information allowed them to see in totality the international diplomatic stakes; but the problems were not necessarily diplomatic, as just as readily they could have understood the fundamental issue to be the rising sectarian tensions or independent Maronite military capabilities. In seeing the issue as diplomatic rather than sectarian or military, a bias driven by their organizational culture, Fatah pursued a diplomatic rather than political or military solution.

Fatah's strategy in Lebanon was walking a tightrope: they had to convince the escalating Maronites they would not interfere while simultaneously preparing militarily for the conflict the Maronites were escalating towards.<sup>7</sup> This strategy was further complicated by every other Palestinian militia besides Fatah firmly siding with and actively supporting the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), the umbrella organization of groups opposed to Maronite dominance in the government. Fatah was trying to convince the Phalangists that the Palestinians would not move against them, but Palestinians were moving against them with or without Fatah. Even as internecine violence spread and refugee camps came under consistent mortar and small arms fire, Fatah sought to prevent conflict. The PLO started more harshly disciplining fighters who instigated conflict or disobeyed orders, and Arafat met with Maronite leaders to establish patrols for repressing unsanctioned violence on both sides.<sup>8</sup> His subsequent

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<sup>7</sup> Khalid al-Hasan, *The Lebanese Crisis: An Attempt to Understand*, Samid Al-Iqtisadi 31 (Amman, 1986). 99.

<sup>8</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 365.

announcement of Palestinian neutrality was punctuated by more Maronite attacks on the camps. Fatah was culturally unequipped to absorb or act on the clear social information coming out of the camps begging for a more active defense and retaliation against the Maronites.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, cross-border raids and Israeli reprisals continued apace. Fatah undertook a handful of terrorist attacks in the occupied territories, including bombing a Jerusalem market and killing 13 civilians.<sup>10</sup> But the Palestinian rejectionists, the PFLP among them, were responsible for most of the attacks on Israel in 1975. Their interest was not in maintaining a base from which to pressure Israel, but to use violence to foster support for militantism and thereby foment a social upheaval in Lebanon that would produce a supportive environment for a long-term military campaign against Israel.<sup>11</sup> Israeli reprisals escalated in response. The refugee camps in Lebanon were now under siege both from Maronite militias and Israeli jets; the Israelis wanted the PLO out of Lebanon, of course, but the Maronite threat ran deeper: they wanted to ethnically cleanse Lebanon of Palestinians completely.<sup>12</sup> That Fatah responded to an explicitly genocidal military threat with diplomacy signifies their cultural divide with the PFLP, and indeed most of the rest of the PLO, who were firmly supportive of the LNM and fervently opposed to dialogue with the Maronites. Fatah's organizational culture privileged the interorganizational information favoring accommodation and negotiation, signals sent by Egypt and the American-Israeli willingness to negotiate after the 1973 war: even under

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<sup>9</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Yael Gruenpeter, "This Week in HAARETZ 1975 Refrigerator Bomb Explodes in Jerusalem's Zion Square," *Haaretz*, July 7, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> As'ad Abu Khalil, "Internal Contradictions in the PFLP: Decision Making and Policy Orientation," *Middle East Journal* 41, no. 3 (1987): 361–78.

<sup>12</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 370.

existential threat, Fatah was focused on appearing evenhanded and reasonable to the international community.

### *Syria Getting Syria's*

In 1975 Egypt made a disengagement agreement with Israel independent of Syria, angering the Syrians and causing deep concern for Fatah. Egyptian diplomatic efforts had begun to publicly point towards a full defection from the Soviet to the American bloc, and Syria sought to strengthen ties with the PLO and Jordan into a new anti-Israel Arab alliance. For the Palestinians, the bad news of the new Egyptian diplomatic strategy was doubled when news broke that the U.S. had promised Israel it would not recognize or negotiate with the PLO, including permitting its presence at multilateral peace talks.<sup>13</sup> Though publicly aligned, the fundamental conflict between Syria's desire for a conflictual posture towards Israel and Fatah's negotiation strategy would quickly become outright conflict. Fatah's strategy, again driven by their cultural concerns for their international image, required they maintain ties with Egypt to gain access to informal dialogue with the U.S.; but Fatah was loathe to work with the Jordanians, who Palestinians still saw, correctly, as trying to supplant the PLO and govern the West Bank.

Fatah's strategy of negotiation—a result of its culturally derived strategic and informational preferences—drove its actions in Lebanon. Hoping to become a peacemaker and thereby a cemented power in Lebanon, Fatah began more actively arming and training opposition forces even as Arafat carried on secret dialogues with the Maronites to preserve calm. But Syria also sought the role of peacemaker and the

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<sup>13</sup> William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decision: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-76*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, 1977).

concomitant prestige and began negotiating with the Maronites to undertake political reform within the confessional system as the opposition called for its abolition.<sup>14</sup> Fatah feared a loss of autonomy if Syria were to impose its will in Lebanon—and this move towards reconciliation with the Maronites seemed to be the first step towards a Syrian-led peace. The PFLP, meanwhile, was united with Palestinian rejectionists and the Lebanese left in being critical of both Fatah and Syria for negotiating with the Maronites but was particularly critical of Fatah for apparently seeking to negotiate with the U.S. and Israel.<sup>15</sup> The Maronite's anti-Palestinian rhetoric antagonized Palestinian refugees and the PFLP's anchored culture led them to follow the public mood of revolution and intercommunal violence towards a strategy of insurgency—both against Israel and the Maronite-led Lebanese state.

Such were the positions of Syria, Fatah, and the PFLP when Maronite militias under the command of future Lebanese Prime Minister Bashir Jmayyil began a campaign of kidnapping and murdering Muslims in Beirut in what would be dubbed “Black Saturday”.<sup>16</sup> Though the Phalange Party denounced the actions taken by Jmayyil, their next move was nonetheless blockading the primarily Muslim and Palestinian parts of East Beirut, preventing food and medicine from reaching the besieged camps.

Arafat remained reticent to take military action against the Maronite militias, but their strategic minutes leaked and were explicit in planning to escalate until the PLO were forced into open conflict. The Maronites hoped to reform agreements with the PLO to

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<sup>14</sup> Quandt. 276.

<sup>15</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 370.

<sup>16</sup> May Tamimova, “The Black Saturday Massacre of 1975: The Discomfort of Assembling the Lebanese Civil War Narrative,” *Contemporary Levant* 3, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 123–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2018.1531531>.

restrict their actions and ethnically cleanse Palestinian refugee camps near Maronite neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> Fatah's central interest was in boosting its diplomatic credentials while pressuring Israel from a stable Lebanese base, and Arafat and other Fatah leaders believed that military conflict with the Maronite militias would damage their international reputation and weaken their military posture towards Israel.<sup>18</sup> The latter was self-evidently true; the former was more rooted in Fatah's cultural beliefs that international legitimacy came from evenhanded centrism to the point of apoliticism. Either way, Fatah's reticence was no longer feasible after the Maronite militias had made clear their intentions. Pressure from the PFLP and other rejectionists, alongside repeated pleas from besieged refugees in Beirut, led Fatah to lead the PLO into a war they could no longer ignore. Though their cultural preference was for interorganizational information, their first priority was survival, forcing Fatah to accept conflict. Nonetheless, in subsequent battles Fatah waffled between committing its full force and restraining itself to the point of tactical defeat, reflecting the strength of their cultural impetus towards mediation such that they repeatedly risked complete military failure. These outright battles resulted in the final mutiny of the Lebanese army in favor of the Maronite militias, who were now fully committed to forcing Palestinians out of Lebanon. Again, facing down a genocidal enemy, Fatah balked at committing to a revolution the PFLP was fully supporting by 1976.

Tensions between Fatah and Syria rose in the meantime. Syria's joint proposal with the Maronites for political reform was roundly rejected, including by Fatah—they feared Syria abandoning the Palestinians in a separate peace with the U.S. undergirded by

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<sup>17</sup> Norman F. Howard, "Tragedy in Lebanon," *Current History* 72, no. 423 (1977): 2.

<sup>18</sup> Howard. 3.

their management of Lebanon. Syria closed Fatah training camps in retaliation.<sup>19</sup> The PFLP and its allies, meanwhile, had begun seeing military success. Defections from the Lebanese military were helpful as were munitions and heavy weapons seized from the military's now unguarded stores. Despite Arafat's reticence to commit, Fatah was also seeing military success and was heartened by the artillery and armor it had secured as a result of seizing Lebanese Army assets.<sup>20</sup> The PFLP's strategy at this time rested on three assumptions: that escalation would force Fatah to join the fight, that the USSR was invested in preventing a Maronite victory and therefore would restrain Syria, and that defeating the Maronites would undermine Fatah's Egypt and America-facing diplomatic strategy.<sup>21</sup> On the first and last points they were correct; their belief that Syria could be restrained, however, was fatefully and completely wrong. The PFLP was culturally disposed against observing and correctly interpreting the interorganizational information as Fatah was, and this critical lack of clarity pushed them to escalate a conflict, supported by their base in the refugee camps, that soon invited Syrian intervention. Fatah and the PFLP's strategy in these early years of the Lebanese Civil War were certainly driven by the information they had available, but it was equally driven by the information they lacked.

Though Arafat was trying to make a deal with Assad, inertia had led Fatah to deepen conflict. They had been increasingly tactically successful and had gained significant strength from looting and seizing arms and armaments from the collapsed Lebanese military—so despite Arafat's reassurances about Fatah's intentions, Syria

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<sup>19</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 378.

<sup>20</sup> Sayigh. 383.

<sup>21</sup> PFLP, "The Organizational, Political, and Financial Report" (Fourth National Congress, April 1981).

intervened on behalf of the nearly defeated Maronites in April 1976. They had secured U.S. support as Jordan secured Israeli non-interference, and immediately set out to resolve the Lebanese crisis and institute a negotiated settlement by force.<sup>22</sup>

The next four months saw the PFLP and its allies resist the Syrian intervention, seeing it (correctly) as part of an American-led plot;<sup>23</sup> the PFLP even assassinated the US ambassador to Lebanon.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile Fatah repeatedly tried to negotiate ceasefires with Syria and the Maronites, alternating between applying military pressure and leveraging it towards a settlement. Simultaneously they continued to pursue contacts with Egypt, much to Syria's chagrin, severely degrading attempts at negotiating a Syrian withdrawal or ceasefire. Fatah had reason to feel confident: the 1976 municipal elections in the West Bank had seen overwhelming success for candidates supporting the PLO as the representative of Palestinians.<sup>25</sup> The elections simultaneously showed popular rejection of Jordanian sovereignty in the West Bank while also precluding the much-feared rise of a non-PLO Palestinian leadership arising in the occupied territories. But Fatah was losing support in Lebanon even as it gained support in the West Bank and Gaza—its attempts at negotiation with Syria were massively unpopular, especially relative to the PFLP's now full opposition and military resistance.<sup>26</sup> But Syrian escalation through the summer of 1976 left the PFLP and Fatah weakened militarily, in part due to Fatah's reticence to fully

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<sup>22</sup> Yair Evron, *War and Intervention in Lebanon: The Israeli-Syrian Deterrence Dialogue* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). 46.

<sup>23</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 390.

<sup>24</sup> CIA, "LEBANON: UPDATE ON THE ASSASSINATION OF FORMER AMBASSADOR FRANCIS E. MELOY," July 1, 1986.

<sup>25</sup> James Fine, "The Rise of the Mayors," ed. Moshe Ma'oz, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 3 (1987): 142–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536795>.

<sup>26</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, June 19, 1976; *Al-Safir*, June 15, 1976.; Said K. Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator* (London, 1999). 155.

commit to fighting the Syrians in hope of a negotiated settlement that never fully materialized.

The Maronites, now aligned with Syria, pressed their military advantage with newly supplied Israeli tanks. They successfully crushed and massacred thousands of Palestinians, guerillas and civilians alike, in the Tal al-Za'atar camp in August 1976. The genocidal assault on the camp came just a week after Arafat pushed more negotiations with the Phalange party, which allowed several hundred children and injured to evacuate: less than a quarter of the total 4,280 Palestinians, mostly civilians, who were killed during the siege of the camp.<sup>27</sup> The blame for Tal al-Za'atar was placed squarely on Syria's shoulders by Fatah and the PFLP. The PFLP's response was more extreme than Fatah's, though, as Tal al-Za'atar had been one of their strongholds for recruiting, and the PFLP's organizational culture made them more susceptible to retaliation rooted in social outrage. Meanwhile, many of the refugees blamed Arafat for the disaster, claiming he had cynically used their families to produce unwilling martyrs for his own political purposes; one instance where Arafat visited the relatives of the soldiers killed in the camp saw widows shouting traitor at him and pelting him with rotten vegetables.<sup>28</sup> The PFLP took advantage of this mood: seeking revenge for the massacre and to spoil any incumbent ceasefires, PFLP fighters shot up an Israeli commercial plane in Istanbul, killing 24 before being shot or captured themselves.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the social information coming from the camps demanding a militant stance against the Maronites and Syria, Fatah pushed further negotiations with the

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<sup>27</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 400-401.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon* (Oxford University Press, 1990). 102.

<sup>29</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 401.

Maronites, strengthened relations with traditional Sunni leaders, and pushed the LNM to negotiate with Syria. Habash responded by denouncing Fatah and Arafat as "...always making concessions, as if they had learned nothing from the experience in Jordan."<sup>30</sup> Of course, it was the lessons Fatah had taken from Jordan—centrally, that any internal conflict in a host state weakened them vis-à-vis Israel—that drove their pathological negotiation, the divergent lessons a result of Fatah and the PFLP's organizational cultures. As was now the PFLP's signature response, they hijacked an airplane in Cyprus to signify their rejection of the mainstream Palestinian leadership—not only the same strategy but the same tactic that had sparked the crisis leading to Black September. The PFLP was as singularly committed to terrorism and insurgency as strategies as Fatah was negotiation; both were culturally inclined towards these attitudes given the interorganizational and social information available, but the PFLP in particular was victim to the informational trap of terrorism, whereby its tactical success encourages its continued use even when it produces no clear strategic gains. The PFLP were able to escape this trap in 1976—repeated tactical failures, including the Israeli raid on PFLP hijackers held up in Uganda, drove the PFLP to give up on terrorism and focus on insurgency in Lebanon instead. Organizational culture pushed the continuation of terrorism, but the effect was not strong enough to overcome consistent and strong tactical information that it simply was not working.

In mid-September, Arafat made concessions to the Syrians, but reneged on them almost immediately due to Palestinian public outrage, only a month after having done nearly the same thing before the massacre at Tal al-Za'atar. Though far from being the

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<sup>30</sup> Sayigh. 405.

strongest critics of Fatah, much of this dissent did come from the PFLP, who distrusted Fatah intensely, suspecting them (correctly) of working with the CIA on the ground in Lebanon and intentionally squandering military advantage to press their political and diplomatic agenda.<sup>31</sup> Yet again, Fatah privileged interorganizational information signaling even the distant possibility of negotiation over social information clearly demanding military action.

But in late 1976 Fatah finally earned a much-needed strategic victory, mobilizing Arab diplomatic support and negotiating with the Maronites to compel Syria to accept a ceasefire. Not only did they succeed in forcing a Syrian ceasefire, but the talks were held under Egyptian and Saudi auspices, and the PLO successfully convinced them over Assad's protests to not invite the Jordanians.<sup>32</sup> The Riyadh Agreement, as this new ceasefire was called, reaffirmed the Cairo Agreement, created a Syrian-dominated Arab peacekeeping force, and a demand that all non-state entities relinquish control of public space and institutions as well as ports and border crossings. Unsurprisingly, the PFLP was vehemently opposed to the agreement, preferring to continue an insurgency against the Syrians and take up the offensive rather than continue with these repeated cycles of ceasefire and armed engagements only for leverage in negotiation.<sup>33</sup> The mood in the PFLP more reflected the traumatized and vengeful mood of the refugees in Lebanon, who were facing an explicitly genocidal threat from the Maronite militias, now supplied by the Israelis.<sup>34</sup> Fatah, meanwhile, returned to pushing for negotiations with the U.S. and Israel.

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<sup>31</sup> Aburish, *Arafat; Al-Hadaf*, October 16, 1976.

<sup>32</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 407-408.

<sup>33</sup> Sayigh. 408.

<sup>34</sup> The explicit strategy of the Phalange at this time was "Using all possible means to remove as many of the resident Palestinian population and those who have supported them [as possible]." Elaine C. Hagopian, "Redrawing the Map in the Middle East: Phalangist Lebanon and Zionist Israel," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1983): 329.

Again, both Fatah and the PFLP were following the information their organizational cultures prioritized.

### *Fatah Tries Again, Again*

The Riyadh Agreement left Fatah in a difficult position. Israeli and Israeli-backed Maronite attacks in the south grew in response to the redeployment of Palestinian forces to the border, and the primarily Syrian peacekeeping force was a latent threat the PLO was anxious to avoid. But Fatah also wanted to push diplomacy with the U.S., which Syria mostly opposed, and Israel saw as a threat; every move towards negotiation was also a step back into conflict with Syria and Israel. The PFLP, meanwhile, was against most of what Fatah was doing. They still wanted to continue fighting Syria and saw the hints of Fatah's negotiation strategy, which they outright rejected. Their plan remained using insurgency and terrorism to inspire a mass uprising to overthrow the Israeli state, which was a distant prospect at best.

Generally, Fatah's strategy seemed to be working. Lines of communication with Jordan were reopened, albeit tenuously, and the PLO began opening diplomatic offices across Europe, the payoff to what an interviewee described as "intimacy politics"—Fatah had invested many of its most capable and educated membership in diplomatic outreach to the West, to seemingly good effect.<sup>35</sup> Attempting to seize this moment, Arafat indicated the PLO would be willing to attend multilateral negotiations in Geneva and advocate for a Palestinian state.<sup>36</sup> This approach was encouraged by newly elected U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his Secretary of State Cyrus Vance indicating American

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<sup>35</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> "Interview with Yasser Arafat," *Al-Ahram*, January 28, 1977.

willingness to let the PLO into negotiations—if they recognized Israel.<sup>37</sup> The PLO, led by Fatah, made its policy explicitly the establishment of a state in the West Bank and Gaza—though remained agnostic on whether this would involve recognizing Israel, leaving open the question of whether this Palestinian state would be antagonistic or cooperative towards its prospective neighbor. The PFLP voted against the program and reinstated their boycott of the PLO.<sup>38</sup>

By this point, Fatah had successfully initiated informal, indirect talks with the U.S. Though promising at first, Arafat faced resistance from the other Palestinian factions, Syria, and the USSR, who was still steadily supplying the PLO with weapons.<sup>39</sup> The debate became moot, however, when in 1977 Egyptian President Sadat officially defected from the Soviet bloc and announced his willingness to make peace with Israel in bilateral talks, leaving the Syrians and the Palestinians bereft of their most powerful partner. As Israeli Defense Minister Dayan put it, “If you take one wheel off a car, it won’t drive. If Egypt is out of the conflict, there will be no more war.”<sup>40</sup> Arafat and Fatah faced serious criticism after Sadat’s announcement. Arafat had been present at Sadat’s speech; he applauded, refused to immediately condemn Sadat, and when Fatah released a statement, only meekly called on him to reconsider. This engendered enormous resistance from Palestinians, Syria, and other Arab states, confirming that there was no regional support for Egypt’s negotiations. The window for negotiation Fatah saw after the end of

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<sup>37</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, DGO-Digital original (Brookings Institution Press, 2005), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt12879nn>.

<sup>38</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*. 190.

<sup>40</sup> Quandt. 190.

the 1973 war ended in 1977 with Sadat's speech and the subsequent Camp David Accords.<sup>41</sup>

### **Preparation and Intervention in Lebanon, 1977 - 1982**

#### *Fatah Diplomacy Goes Nowhere*

The PLO had no viable choice besides aligning with other Arab states against Egypt, despite Arafat's personal reticence to cut off Fatah's line of communication with the U.S. through Egypt.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, he recognized the regional shift, and the PLO joined a new bloc with Syria, Algeria, South Yemen, and Libya. This move involved signing a pledge, pushed by the Libyans, that rejected UNSCR 242 as well as peace, recognition, or negotiation with Israel. The PFLP rejoiced at this shift and ended their boycott of the PLO. Arafat refused to sign the document (though Fatah formally did so through Khalaf) and maintained unofficial ambassadors in Egypt to continue talks with Sadat in secret. At the same time, Fatah strengthened ties with the USSR, not only because they needed the financial and military aid but also as a signal to the U.S. that the PLO remained a central player in the Middle East.

Fatah could change tact, switch blocs, even publicly forsake negotiation—but it could not change its cultural perception that power was derived from international prestige. Arafat believed personally this prestige had to come from American acceptance, while Khalaf and Wazir believed it could come from the Soviet bloc just as readily, but the fundamental cultural belief remained. Fatah prioritized the fixed and the international: if the U.S. was the key to Israel, then the U.S. had to be befriended, or at least not

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<sup>41</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 447.

<sup>42</sup> Sayigh. 425.

antagonized. The centrality of the U.S. seemed to be a lesson the PFLP drew as well, but its anchored culture privileged instead the social information coming from the refugee communities who knew that any deal with the U.S. or Israel would preclude their ability to return home.<sup>43</sup> Arab workers, who the PFLP fundraised from in Kuwait and elsewhere, espoused similar supportive views towards the PFLP's resistance to negotiation and commitment to liberating all of Palestine.<sup>44</sup> For the PFLP, if the U.S. was the key to Israel, the U.S. had to be defeated.

A Fatah terrorist attack inside Israel in 1978 was intended to show the U.S. the cost of excluding it following statements from the Carter administration that emphasized marginalizing the PLO.<sup>45</sup> The subsequent IDF response was heavier than before, surprising the guerillas: the Israelis launched a full offensive invasion of Lebanon. Fighting was short and sparse. Palestinian forces attempted to mount a static defense but given their qualitative and quantitative inferiority to the Israeli force, they mostly tactically retreated. International condemnation of the Israelis led swiftly to a U.N.-brokered ceasefire and peacekeeping force, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Though there was victory for the Palestinians in survival, Fatah's goal had been to spoil Israeli negotiations with Egypt and the U.S., and in this they failed.<sup>46</sup> UNIFIL also effectively closed the vast majority of the front with Israel. The Israeli invasion did, however, attract numerous new recruits to the PLO even as their commitment to the ceasefire was met with protests from Palestinians in Lebanon.<sup>47</sup> These

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<sup>43</sup> Author interview with Palestinian union activist, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Leila Khaled, *My people shall live: The autobiography of a revolutionary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973). 118-119.

<sup>45</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 426.

<sup>46</sup> William Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C, 1986). 123.

<sup>47</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 428.

protests, and resistance from other Palestinian groups, were exacerbated by Arafat's offer after the invasion to guarantee Israeli security in return for statehood.<sup>48</sup> Again, Fatah felt it had leverage and used it to negotiate even while Palestinians essentially begged them publicly not to do so: social information yet again ignored in favor of interorganizational information.

Meanwhile, the PFLP continued its strategy of broader social revolution; Habash celebrated the effect of their attacks on Israel and suggested that the Arabs in areas surrounding Israel and Palestinians inside Israel should all begin taking similar violent action, and that this was the path to defeating Israel.<sup>49</sup> No such uprisings occurred; there was never any real chance they would. Fatah, on the other hand, set about befriending and cooperating with UNIFIL to insinuate themselves into future negotiations and, as always, from their cultural penchant towards pursuing international respect, embodied in the UN. This position infuriated the rejectionists: Fatah's plan was evidently preventing their attacks on Israel to improve its international relations.<sup>50</sup> Palestinian rejectionist groups, particularly those backed by Iraq, began to attack UNIFIL positions as Fatah cracked down on them.

It was then in September 1978 that the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords were formally signed at Camp David. The Syrians and Iraqis put their differences aside to unify against the deal, while other Arab states that had remained neutral now protested Egypt's decision. Oil-rich Gulf states promised aid to Syria, Jordan, and the PLO as well. Undeterred, Arafat sent the Americans a letter to open a new discussion, as the Camp

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<sup>48</sup> Bernard Gwertzaian, "BEGIN ARRIVES IN US. AND WILL SEE CARTER ABOUT MIDEAST ISSUES," *The New York Times*, May 1, 1978, sec. Archives.

<sup>49</sup> George Habash, *Speeches and Articles, 1977-1979*, Red Paper 36, 1979. 170.

<sup>50</sup> Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.

David Accords had mentioned Palestinian autonomy.<sup>51</sup> He did not do so in isolation, recognizing the power of the new nearly unanimous Arab position; Jordan too thought diplomacy with the U.S. was the path forward, and Fatah sought to repair the rift between them to work together towards a U.S. brokered deal with Israel. Arafat even met with US Senator Paul Findley a handful of times and continued, without approval from the other groups in the PLO, to negotiate with the Maronites for quiet in Lebanon.

The PFLP was naturally opposed to all this, especially dialogue with Jordan, fearing a plot to disperse Palestinian refugees throughout the Arab world in return for a Jordanian-backed statelet in the West Bank.<sup>52</sup> The Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation quickly became an anti-Fatah and anti-negotiation bloc, including essentially every Palestinian militia except Fatah. The PFLP reconciled with Syria, critically showing it was not so ideologically dogmatic as to refuse a powerful ally when it needed one, and rational enough to recognize the interorganizational information from Camp David structuring its options such that alignment with Syria was worth overcoming Palestinian refugee ongoing distaste for Syria. Moreover, the PFLP was hoping to invite the USSR to oppose Camp David as the Soviets were making global gains in the late 1970s. But instead, Fatah rallied control and left the PFLP to undertake yet another boycott of the PLO as most of the other groups fell in line behind Fatah.<sup>53</sup>

Despite Fatah's hopes, they needed leverage, and military action remained the best way to get it. Attacks against Israel increased, Arafat stressed relations with the USSR, and Fatah officials threatened to attack oil interests.<sup>54</sup> As the Camp David

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<sup>51</sup> Quandt, *Camp David*. 265.

<sup>52</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 438-439.

<sup>53</sup> Habash, *Speeches and Articles, 1977-1979*. 127.

<sup>54</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 445.

Accords were finally signed, the entire Arab world was united against Egypt and the PLO was receiving significant new funding from the Gulf states and other international backers opposed to Egyptian diplomacy. Combined with resistance from below, Fatah had little choice but to table its plans for negotiation with the Americans. This was more of a strategic setback than a strategic change, however. For Fatah, the plan remained the same: garner international prestige and leverage to get a seat at the table in negotiations with the U.S. and, inevitably although not explicitly, Israel. With the Arab world momentarily united against the U.S. and Egypt, now was the time to gain leverage independent of them. Camp David was a clarifying moment of strong interorganizational information, strong enough to drive the PFLP into Syria's arms and Fatah out of Egypt's, even though both would have preferred a different alignment. Organizational culture's constituted preferences are not perfectly determinative, and the moment of Camp David created conditions that clearly incentivized aligning against the Egyptians. It did not hurt that either path equally displeased refugees, who loathed both negotiation and the Syrians at this point.

### *The Statist Approach and Militarization*

Fatah had two advantages at this time despite otherwise dire circumstances. First, the PLO now enjoyed unified support from the Arab states as the sole representative of Palestinians. Second, they were now flush with cash as the leaders of the PLO. These two advantages respectively encouraged and allowed Fatah to seize total control of the PLO through patronage and its development into a state-in-exile. The organizational details of increased statism are mostly not relevant here—functionally it mostly involved

centralizing control of the PLO in Fatah's hands, expanding social services to refugees, and establishing systems of patronage—but its strategic goals and prerequisites became the main features of Fatah strategy. Increased statism was intended to signal responsibility and legitimacy for negotiation in the future, but this required enough security to organize a bureaucracy and service a coherent social base, which in turn required strong defense.<sup>55</sup> Military means had long since become mostly a source of leverage in future negotiations for Fatah. But now, violent means went from their secondary position to tertiary, no longer applying political pressure to negotiate but instead defending the new non-violent means for applying political pressure. Fatah's organizational culture made this change inevitable: in prioritizing interorganizational information and internalizing its lessons, Fatah craved international legitimacy, the highest form of which was statehood. In transforming the PLO to a state-in-exile, Fatah believed it could grasp hitherto unachievable power—which, again, Fatah thought of as primarily derived from international prestige and respect. Defeating Israel militarily became less a strategic objective and more a recruiting tool.

The Israeli invasion in 1978 had seen the failure of a static defense against the Israelis. Fatah saw this as signifying two military necessities. First, that they needed better integration and organization of forces: part of the problem in 1978 was a lack of coordination among units and integration of heavy weapons.<sup>56</sup> Second, since they did not have the ability to wage a static defense against the Israelis, who wielded more modern technology with a larger force, they needed a more dynamic approach that could combine

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<sup>55</sup> Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 223.; Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> "The Military Action of the Palestinian Revolution and the Prospects for Development," *Shu'un Filastiniyya*, no. 105 (August 1980).

their growing heavy weapons capabilities with the advantages of guerilla war.<sup>57</sup> This could only work with sanctuary—in which to build forces and escape after targeted confrontations. Thanks to newly generous Arab and Soviet arms and money, the Palestinians had acquired tanks, albeit World War II-era antiques, armored vehicles, rockets, and heavy artillery. These new weapons would deter Maronite attacks while the Palestinians developed a regularized force capable of fighting the Israelis.<sup>58</sup>

The development of this fighting force meant, for Fatah in particular, sending fighters abroad to receive specialized training. Fatah fighters were trained as pilots, engineers, tank operators, artillery operators, and mechanics; despite this effort, many of the trained fighters did not gain useful experience abroad. Some, like Fatah's pilots, gained experience and training for capabilities they had not even yet acquired. In searching for prestige, Fatah established traditional troop structures despite lacking the numbers they signify; for example, Fatah established several battalions, meant to be between 300 and 1000 fighters each, that consisted of only 100 fighters or less.<sup>59</sup> Thereby officers were often trained for battalion-level tactics when they needed small-unit expertise. Though the training was part of building a capable fighting force, and indeed, some Palestinian leaders believed by 1980 they could stand up to Israel in the field, Arafat and Fatah leadership more broadly were more concerned with how sending soldiers for training built international relationships, established Palestinian presence in foreign capitals and halls of power, and boosted diplomatic credentials by offering

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<sup>57</sup> "We Have Created a Psychological Gap between the Israeli Citizen and Leadership," *Shu'un Filastiniyya*, no. 119 (October 1981).

<sup>58</sup> "We Have Created a Psychological Gap between the Israeli Citizen and Leadership."

<sup>59</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 450.

training to other weak states and revolutionary movements.<sup>60</sup> The PFLP followed Fatah's example, seeking out heavy weapons and organizing unit structures far beyond their actual strength, but did so out of a genuine desire to fight Israel and an earnest belief they could win.<sup>61</sup> For Fatah, the tactical utility of military capabilities was secondary to their strategic utility as leverage: support for U.S.-opposed revolutionary movements and the base in Lebanon would be, in theory, traded for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>62</sup>

Military means had been so central to Fatah and the PFLP that, by the late 1970s, they had missed several opportunities to change direction. Between 1974 and 1976 there was a large wave of protests in the West Bank, not to mention the mayoral elections, that could have been co-opted and directed by the PLO as they would be a decade later. But these opportunities were missed, because neither Fatah or the PFLP were embedded in, or even remotely attuned to, the Palestinians living in the occupied territories. They still thought, as they learned through experience in the previous decade, that military action was the best way to activate a politically dormant Palestinian population.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in 1978 the PFLP reaffirmed a commitment to clandestine military action in the occupied territories, even arguing in its military doctrine manual that a guerilla campaign, generally argued to only be effective in areas with rough terrain to hide and abundant

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<sup>60</sup> "The Military Action of the Palestinian Revolution and the Prospects for Development."

<sup>61</sup> PFLP, "The Organizational, Political, and Financial Report"; Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 222.

<sup>62</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 453.; Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> "Issues of the National Struggle in the West Bank and Gaza Strip," *Shu'un Filastiniyya* 118 (September 1981).

space to maneuver, could succeed in Gaza, a tiny strip of flat land surrounded by hostile powers.<sup>64</sup>

The trend in the occupied territories, led by local communists, was decidedly non-violent. Their growing success in mobilizing labor unions, students, and young people led the PFLP and Fatah to compete for influence in civil society in the occupied territories. Both began earnestly attempting to dominate civil society organizations or, if that failed, establishing competing organizations that they could control.<sup>65</sup> From a strategic standpoint, this was purely about political control and supporting military efforts for Fatah.<sup>66</sup> But for the PFLP, this was the beginning of a larger strategic shift. By 1980, though still dedicated to fomenting a “people’s war”, the Popular Front leadership increasingly believed that “mass action”—that is, non-violent civil resistance like strikes, demonstrations, and local popular committees—was a critical corollary to armed action. There was also a stated, if not pervasive, belief that this kind of mass action could supplant armed attacks as the primary means of mobilizing the population; though this would still be in the pursuit of an eventual social revolution that would use violent force.<sup>67</sup> Though the PFLP was not embedded in the West Bank or Gaza as it was in Lebanon’s Palestinian refugee community, their culturally driven prioritization of social information still led them towards civil resistance on the basis of its support in the occupied territories—though to be clear, this approach was not explicitly opposed among refugees, who had before 1975 been involved in the non-violent protest movement that

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<sup>64</sup> PFLP, *Political Report Issued by the Fourth National Congress* (Beirut, 1981); Mao Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 479.

<sup>66</sup> Helena Cobban, “The PLO and the ‘Intifada,’” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (1990): 218.

<sup>67</sup> PFLP, “Mass Resistance in the Occupied Homeland - An Assessment,” *PFLP Bulletin*, no. 45 (December 1980). 10.

preceded the outbreak of violence.<sup>68</sup> Either trend was irrelevant for Fatah, who saw civil resistance more in terms of its international acceptability and potential for applying non-violent pressure on Israel, though at this early stage this was mostly about insinuating Fatah into every possible political sphere in the pursuit of statist legitimacy.

### *Israeli Intervention in Lebanon*

Though the West Bank and Gaza had become more important for the PFLP and Fatah, Lebanon remained the central theater. Insurgency also remained the central strategy performed, though for Fatah it was increasingly a routine exercise to build and maintain negotiation leverage rather than an active pursuit of military goals. The dynamic of Palestinian raids fueling Israeli reprisals against Lebanese civilians continued throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Increasingly, especially for the Shiites who dominated the south, blame was laid on the PLO for the costs of Israeli reprisals. This encouraged the Israelis, seeking to isolate the Palestinians politically in Lebanon, to ramp up their air and artillery strikes. Fatah's most recent attempt at diplomacy in Western Europe had failed to produce meaningful results, as Europeans emphasized UNSCR 242 and did not recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of Palestinians.<sup>69</sup> Fatah had weathered serious resistance to this diplomatic push, and now returned to a more militant approach; they strengthened relations with Syria and Libya and undertook several attacks inside Israel. This was also in response to further impediments to negotiation, especially the election of arch-reactionary Ronald Reagan in the United

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<sup>68</sup> Samih Farsoun, "Student Protests and the Coming Crisis in Lebanon," *MERIP Reports*, no. 19 (1973): 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011841>.

<sup>69</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 502.

States and conflict among PLO supportive states Iran and Iraq. Uncertainty reigned after the continued roadblocks to negotiation and a lack of direct conflict with Israel—there was little tactical information and interorganizational information seemed to only want them sidelined. Fatah as ever responded by changing its approach, reemphasizing insurgency rather than diplomacy as the best means to assert itself on the world stage.

Fatah also made a brief foray back into terrorism during the uncertainty, when on May 6 1980 several of its operatives killed Jewish settlers occupying a hospital, an attack notable for its use of West Bank locals rather than refugee infiltrators.<sup>70</sup> This did not signify any real increase in capabilities in the West Bank for Fatah—targeting civilians with small arms was relatively easy to plan and execute—but the spiraling communal violence that the Hebron attack begat made repeat attacks unappealing.<sup>71</sup> This was also a moment when Fatah was confidently escalating violence alongside successful artillery attacks in northern Israel—though this too would become strategically less attractive as Israeli reprisals intensified and a ground invasion became increasingly likely.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, the tactical mix of guerilla war and heavy weapons imagined by Fatah seemed to be working, i.e. angering Israel and drawing attention to Fatah, a belief that was underscored by the unprecedented evacuations they forced in northern Israel. Fatah enjoyed yet another victory by securing a ceasefire, and moreover maintaining it, under the auspices of the U.S. and in indirect negotiation with Israel through UNIFIL and the Saudis. This was fairly counted as indirect recognition of the PLO's legitimacy; their ability to sustain a fight with Israel, negotiate a ceasefire, and maintain discipline were

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<sup>70</sup> Dial Torgerson, "Arab Attack on Hebron Signals Shift of Terrorist Tactics," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), May 6, 1980, sec. PART II.

<sup>71</sup> Torgerson.

<sup>72</sup> "We Have Created a Psychological Gap between the Israeli Citizen and Leadership."

also boons to their international prestige.<sup>73</sup> For the moment, it seemed Fatah's reorientation towards military means after failing to corral diplomatic support in Europe, another instance of tactical change under uncertainty, was working.

Other international events contributed to Israeli alarm and PLO optimism. Saudi Arabia was publishing its own peace plan shortly after facilitating the indirect ceasefire talks between the PLO and the U.S., Arafat successfully began clandestine indirect talks with the Reagan administration, and the USSR recognized the PLO as the sole representative of Palestinians with full diplomatic rights in Moscow.<sup>74</sup> Fatah were also greatly encouraged by the effects of U.S. pressure on Israel, reaffirming the belief underpinning the diplomatic strategy that the path to Palestine ran through Washington. The PFLP were more heartened by the effectiveness of concentrated artillery strikes on northern Israel in coercing the IDF into accepting a ceasefire, believing it could lead to greater military success against Israel; Fatah was more excited about the deterrent potential of the successful strikes.<sup>75</sup> The PLO's hope was limited and brief, however, as it recognized Israel's frustration at their success would likely produce another invasion of Lebanon—the Israelis were not terribly private about their desire to undertake a ground invasion of Lebanon. What the PLO, and especially Fatah, now wanted was deterrent capabilities to defend the organizational gains they hoped to convert into negotiations, and so sought out additional heavy artillery and anti-air capabilities.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, despite the overwhelming consensus that an attack was coming, Fatah and the PFLP both

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<sup>73</sup> Avner Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security: Politics, Strategy and the Israeli Experience in Lebanon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). 89.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Gowers and Tony Walker, *Behind the Myth: Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Revolution* (New York: Interlink Pub Group Inc, 1991). 252.

<sup>75</sup> "We Have Created a Psychological Gap between the Israeli Citizen and Leadership."

<sup>76</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

believed the invasion would likely be contained mostly in the south, and that international pressure alongside UNIFIL would prevent a prolonged engagement.

Though the Palestinians had accurate intelligence on the Israeli war plans, they did not have a clear view of the extent of Israeli and U.S. goals. Arafat raised concerns to the Syrians and Saudis—as the PFLP accused Fatah of exaggerating the invasion threat for political gains—but found that both the Saudis and Syrians were not concerned, expecting the Israelis to go no deeper than 40 kilometers into Lebanon, a far cry from the stronghold of Beirut.<sup>77</sup> The assassination of the Israeli ambassador in the UK by an Iraqi intelligence-backed Palestinian group gave the Israelis the pretext to invade. After airstrikes on Beirut and some reciprocal rocket fire from the PLO, the IDF marched into Lebanon directly through the UNIFIL buffer zone; the UN called for a ceasefire that Arafat sought to accept and hold, but it did nothing to halt the determined IDF advance of roughly 75,000 ground troops and 1,200 tanks. They were met by a Palestinian force of 15,000—though only 6,000 were stationed on the border—about 60 tanks, many in disrepair and immobile, and several hundred scattered and hidden artillery pieces.<sup>78</sup>

The Palestinian forces were routed; the PLO military command were hit with an artillery strike, wounding many of them, communication broke down, and the Palestinian forces fled in confused retreat. The advance towards Beirut was only briefly interrupted by PLO resistance in the fortified camps and guerilla-style ambushes, but mostly they moved unimpeded. Syrian forces fared no better, and within two weeks the IDF had Beirut surrounded. But political resistance from the Israeli and U.S. governments began

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<sup>77</sup> PFLP, “The Organizational, Political, and Financial Report”; Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 523.

<sup>78</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 524.

to limit the IDF's scope of action. This brief pause allowed the PLO to recuperate and plan a defense of the city alongside LNM and Amal forces. Though their military preparedness was reasonably good at this point, the Israelis were pushing for a PLO withdrawal from the city, and the Lebanese factions argued to Arafat that they should do so.<sup>79</sup> Arab support was paltry as the Syrians were unwilling to reenter the fight and the Saudis and Egyptians could not convince the U.S. to call for an Israeli withdrawal. Indeed, the Americans vetoed any attempt in the UN Security Council to restrict the Israeli advance.<sup>80</sup>

Faced with an Israeli siege, and begged to decamp the country by the LNM, Fatah and the PFLP both knew withdrawal was inevitable. But they could not accept withdrawal with no concessions. PLO leaders resolved to negotiate under fire, hoping to preserve morale among the rank-and-file at the same time.<sup>81</sup> And they were certainly under fire—the Israeli bombardment was brutal. They used white phosphorous and set off car bombs, killing numerous civilians. This, as well as successful raids on IDF positions and artillery fire from within Beirut, hardened resolve among the Palestinians and Lebanese. Arafat's attempts at diplomacy were also finding purchase, as the French and later the U.S. presented favorable terms for withdrawal, terms that the Israelis summarily rejected.<sup>82</sup> But another successful use of concentrated mobile artillery fire prevented the IDF from amassing forces for a ground assault, and as Israeli domestic opinion harshly soured on the invasion, the Israelis agreed on a ceasefire.

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<sup>79</sup> Khalidi Rashid, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking During the 1982 War* (Columbia University Press, 2014). 114.

<sup>80</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*. 250.

<sup>81</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 531.

<sup>82</sup> Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985). 208.

But the ceasefire failed as sympathy for the PLO grew and the U.S. began negotiating a withdrawal agreement with them, alarming Israel. Preceded by a week of bombing the city center, the IDF began its assault on Beirut on August 3, 1982. Both Fatah and the PFLP mounted a moderately successful mobile defense premised on the success of mobile artillery undertaking sudden concentrated fire. They had become skilled in the art of evading Israeli air and artillery strikes on their heavy weapons, and both groups avoided significant material losses; Fatah claimed to have lost only 2 percent of their total combat strength, while the PFLP lost only a handful of mobile artillery and rocket launchers.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, the PLO were pushed back from their positions. The assault had been somewhat of a surprise, considering the PLO and U.S. had agreed on a withdrawal mere hours after the initial Israeli assault on August 3. The Israelis only approved the agreement on August 12, by which time they'd been bombing Beirut for over a week straight, killing hundreds of civilians.

The IDF agreed to withdraw from Beirut as PLO leaders and fighters were escorted onto planes and boats to take them to other Arab capitals; the PLO were out of Lebanon a mere 12 years after being kicked out of Jordan. But Israeli war crimes pushed the U.S. towards the PLO, which in turn gave Arafat and Fatah greater confidence in future negotiations. Fatah was able to instrumentalize Palestinian suffering in Lebanon quickly and with maximum diplomatic effect both because they could see the anti-Israel interorganizational information coming from the U.S. and Europe and they immediately recognized the fact of Israeli material superiority and accepted that withdrawal was

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<sup>83</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 536-537.

necessary despite being at the zenith of their military strength. The former was due to their floating culture, the latter to its dynamic culture.

Fatah's confidence was at once dashed and reinforced by Reagan's announcement of a plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace. It still excluded the PLO entirely, denied a Palestinian entity formal statehood or independence, and linked it to Jordanian sovereignty. Nonetheless, though they did not accept the plan, Fatah focused attention on its positive points, namely the affirmation that Israel should withdraw from territory occupied in 1967, freeze settlements, and that the Palestinians had legitimate national rights. The PFLP rejected the deal as an attempt to force concessions from the PLO, stating, "our people will undermine any alternative which imperialism is trying to impose".<sup>84</sup> The far-right Israeli government not only rejected the proposal immediately but were incensed at the assertion that they should freeze settlements, calling Jewish settlement in the West Bank a "natural right".<sup>85</sup>

The IDF reneged on their promised withdrawal, and soon thereafter the U.S. suddenly and without warning withdrew the peacekeeping force they had sent to ensure a peaceful PLO withdrawal. Then, the darling of the Maronites and president-elect of the contested Lebanese government Bashir Jmayyil was assassinated on September 14, 1982. The IDF then supported and equipped furious Maronite militiamen as they massacred the Palestinian Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, killing roughly 3,000 refugees between September 15 and September 17.<sup>86</sup> The IDF withdrew from Beirut only after two more

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<sup>84</sup> David B. Ottaway, "PLO, Jordanian Officials: Plan Has Positive Points," *Washington Post*, September 3, 1982.

<sup>85</sup> Edward Walsh, "Israel Turns Down Reagan Peace Plan, Refuses Talks on It," *Washington Post*, September 3, 1982.

<sup>86</sup> "Israel in Lebanon: Report of the International Commission to Enquire into Reported Violations of International Law by Israel during Its Invasion of the Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 3 (1983): 117-33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536156>.

weeks of seizing PLO intelligence and killing remnants of the Palestinian militias under stiff U.S. pressure and facing mass protests in Tel Aviv.

Fatah and the PFLP found themselves much in the same position as they were in 1971: dislocated, militarily defeated, and at odds about how to apportion blame. There was a near-universal feeling among Palestinians that there needed to be a strategic review and self-critique. Fatah did not initially conduct a review, doing so only after sustained pressure from the rank-and-file and nonetheless failing to produce a final report; related documents were tightly guarded and remain unreleased.<sup>87</sup> The PFLP, meanwhile, levied serious critiques both at its own actions and those of Fatah. They criticized their inability to predict the scale of Israeli intervention and the nature of how it would proceed, decrying the lack of military and strategic unity among the Palestinian militias. The defeat in Lebanon for the PFLP meant refocusing on armed struggle in the occupied territories and resisting “the liquidationist political settlement” fostered by Arab regimes, the U.S., and implicitly Fatah.<sup>88</sup>

These negative lessons were balanced by some positive results: Palestinian military performance had shown fighting Israel was possible and there had been notable tactical successes, and international sympathy was now more firmly pro-Palestinian than it had ever been.<sup>89</sup> It’s no surprise that the anchored PFLP more readily accepted popular critique; it’s just as unsurprising that they took Palestinian rage at the massacres as a signal to continue the armed struggle even from afar, as the PFLP’s culture seemed to now absorb all popular contempt for Israel as support for violent strategies. This is not to

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<sup>87</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 541.

<sup>88</sup> PFLP Central Information Department, “The Political Report Issued by the Central Committee in Its Fourth Session Concerning the War in Lebanon,” *Al-Hadaf*, 1983.

<sup>89</sup> PFLP Central Information Department.

say insurgency and terrorism were necessarily unpopular among the refugee community, but more to say that the PFLP had no way of firmly knowing this was the case. Instead, because the discourse of armed struggle had boosted popular support for them or Fatah in the past, violent strategies became the way in which the PFLP channeled Palestinian outrage.

Fatah agreed with the positive parts of the PFLP's assessment but took away radically different lessons. Arafat and the Fatah leadership now saw again a window of opportunity for negotiation, but even more promising than it had been in 1974. The U.S. and Europeans seemed to be on board for a potential negotiated settlement, and though they were weak militarily, there was hope in 1982 that sympathy and attention from the disaster in Lebanon could be converted to political capital towards a negotiation. Instead, U.S. attention on the Middle East wilted, Arab allies broadly abandoned the PLO in favor of other regional concerns, and political turmoil in the USSR severely curtailed their shipments of arms and financial assistance. Though they did not know it yet, the withdrawal from Lebanon was the last time the PLO would pose a meaningful military threat to Israel or its interests. They would spend the next few years in Tunis desperately trying to work with Jordan towards a diplomatic solution and re-enter Lebanon.

### *From Exile to Exile*

The first task after Lebanon was reconciling the divergent views among the PLO factions on how to proceed. A December 1982 meeting in Yemen produced a set of principles meant to be a compromise:

The Aden meeting, attended by Yasir Arafat, George Habash and Nayif Hawatmeh, was a first attempt to strike a balance between 'hard-liners' and moderates within the Palestinian

movement since the departure from Beirut. While the former inscribed maximalist phraseology (such as 'historic rights' and the right of return), called for reconciliation with Syria and denied power of attorney to Jordan, the latter succeeded in leaving the door open for a confederal relationship with Jordan.<sup>90</sup>

This compromise immediately became untenable as reconciling with Syria and hardline language about non-negotiable points were fundamentally contradictory to working towards a negotiated confederation with Jordan. Increasingly, attempts to push the so-called “Jordanian option” elucidated the growing strategic divide in the PLO centered on the right of return and armed struggle. The military options that had been the core of Palestinian strategy were now unavailable without a base in a country bordering Israel, and the points of dispute with the Jordanians centered on the PLO’s autonomy in negotiations which in part meant a near-certain abrogation of the right of return for refugees from 1948.

A larger regional shift saw Jordan and Egypt aligning as a conservative bloc resisting both the nationalist/socialist bloc of Iraq, Yemen, and Syria and the growing Islamist movement in Iran and Afghanistan, which had already established a presence in Lebanon in the newly prominent Hezbollah.<sup>91</sup> The Syrian-Iraqi and Jordanian-Egyptian blocs both sought to exert greater control over the PLO as a way of muting Palestinian resistance to their preferred approach to Israel. This produced three broader factions in the PLO, especially after a significant portion of Fatah officers and fighters split from the party in protest of Arafat’s leadership and his moves towards negotiating with the U.S.

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<sup>90</sup> Naseer Aruri, “The PLO and the Jordan Option,” *Third World Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1985): 885.

<sup>91</sup> Aruri. 888.

and Israel—who, after all, had just been complicit in the Maronite ethnic cleansing of the Sabra and Shatila camps.<sup>92</sup>

For decades, Fatah and the PFLP faced a relatively united Middle East. When conflict arose, it was dealt with through positional jockeying, subterfuge, and only brief military conflict. When interorganizational information from the international scene was strong, it was so during moments of unity in the Middle East, such as the post-Karama period or the brief period of Arab unity after the October War. But after Camp David, the Middle East divided along firm lines. This created a clear choice between two potential alignments, and observing the same conditions, the PFLP and Fatah moved in opposite directions. The third bloc of radical Islamism began to gain popular traction among Palestinians in the early 1980s—a trend to be revisited when it explodes in the late 1980s. But for the time-being, the PFLP went where they felt the Palestinian diaspora wanted them: aligned with Syria and continuing to resist negotiation.

For the time-being, the Fatah defectors, pushing alignment with the Syrian bloc and backed by Syria and Libya, began an active military revolt among the remaining forces in Lebanon. Arafat then made his classic move yet again, endangering his person by landing in Tripoli where remaining PLO forces faced down a joint Syrian, Libyan, and revolting Palestinian force. Arafat's brave bid combined with successful diplomatic lobbying and propagandizing made the revolt inert as a planned assault on Tripoli floundered.<sup>93</sup> Many revolting Fatah members defected when fighting began, and many others intentionally missed targets or fired blank shells from artillery pieces. Subsequent protests in the camps and a popular prisoner exchange with the Israelis also handicapped

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<sup>92</sup> Aruri.

<sup>93</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997. 568-570.

any Syrian attempt to use the Fatah split to form a separate Palestinian movement it could control. At the same time, and harkening to the critical role of polling in the future, polls in the West Bank and Gaza placed support for Arafat in this conflict at a stunning 92% support.<sup>94</sup>

The PFLP, knowing Fatah's popularity and constitutively opposed to violent infighting, announced alongside the DFLP a mitigated neutrality in the intra-Fatah conflict in which they endorsed many of the criticisms of Fatah while rejecting a military solution. Notable among these criticisms and reflecting their larger shift towards non-violence, the statement called for the first time for the independence of Palestinian mass organizations and unions, which had become intensely factionalized.<sup>95</sup> The fighting ended, and a successful Arafat secured a U.S.-backed withdrawal, cementing his victory with a trip to Cairo and meeting with new Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the way back to Tunis. Fatah and Arafat had put down what could be fairly termed a rogue subculture in Fatah, who joined because they believed in a unified national front but could not accept the prospect of negotiation with Israel. This was the contradiction inherent in Fatah: being the most popular faction, many joined because they believed their popularity meant they would also be the most in line with Palestinian popular opinion, but Fatah saw themselves as above popular input. Arafat and Fatah's leaders shared the underlying cultural precept that, strategically speaking, they knew better than rejectionists who they considered impractical idealists.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> David Richardson, "Almost All W. Bank Arabs Continue Support for Arafat," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 2, 1983.

<sup>95</sup> PFLP and DFLP, "Program for Unity and Reform," October 10, 1983.

<sup>96</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*, 107.

Reflecting Fatah's cultural bias towards state actors, the leadership was quick to blame the split on Syria and its international allies trying to seize control over the movement, while simultaneously moving to align with Jordan diplomatically. Their brief cooperation fell apart within a year—they had very few common interests, as Jordan was working towards cooperation with Israel in the West Bank. But the concessions Fatah made to Jordan initially displayed their weakness, as they accepted confederation Jordan and a joint diplomatic delegation, both of which had been non-starters a few years earlier. The PFLP could not swallow the concessions, especially since they were made to the Jordanians, whose actions in 1970's Black September had not been forgotten even 15 years later; they joined the newly constituted Syrian-backed PLO alternative, the Palestinian National Salvation Front (PNSF), in protest.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, in Lebanon, renewed PLO and Fatah presence in the refugee camps led Syria to order the Shiite militia Amal, now largely a proxy for Syria, to clear the PLO out of the camps. Amal's assault on the camps failed, however, as the siege drove even rejectionist forces, including the local PFLP contingent, to join with Fatah in fighting off Amal against the orders of leaders in Damascus. The Syrian military intervened to take over Amal's failure, but despite greater military success, the political fallout made even more problems for them.

The tenuous position of the PFLP and other opposition groups was manipulated by Fatah to obtain their quiescence. Their anchored culture could not long accept attacks on the camps or unpopular intra-Palestinian conflict, and Fatah—wise as ever to the intricate positions and preferences of not only states but other factions—was able to

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<sup>97</sup> "Arab Reports and Analysis," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1985).

manipulate this internal contradiction to their benefit. As a military force or social movement, Fatah was not terribly effective. As a diplomatic and political actor, they were unrivaled. Arafat in particular was able to escalate or de-escalate the conflict in the camps to pressure the PFLP, who returned to the PLO fold in 1987 in return for Fatah promising to scale down contacts with Egypt and abrogate the Amman Accords.<sup>98</sup> These were easy concessions anyway, as the Amman Accords had already been abandoned by the Jordanians and Egypt had very little leverage to offer once it had made peace with Israel. By early 1987, the PLO had successfully mended international relationships in the Syrian bloc that the PNSF split had damaged, including Algeria, South Yemen, and the USSR, as well as a limited reconciliation with Jordan.

This reconciliation is a stark example of the PFLP's cultural preference for social information: they could have led a Syrian-backed counter-PLO in conjunction with other rejectionists and had the support of not only Syria but also Iraq, Libya, and Algeria. The PLO was internationally isolated and Fatah was weaker than ever, especially after 1986 as the Tunisians considered strongly kicking the PLO out of the country. That they instead chose to re-enter the PLO in response to Syrian assault on the refugee camps and the subsequent outpouring of support for Fatah shows the PFLP preferred to be marginalized internationally and popular with its base than the opposite. This cultural preference explains the PFLP's oft-changing alignment, as they were caught between resisting an unpopular negotiation strategy and supporting the popular principle of Palestinian unity, following seemingly contradictory social information as if it were leading them by the nose. But in early 1987, the negotiation strategy was seemingly just

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<sup>98</sup> "The War of the Camps," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 1 (1986): 191–94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537045>.

as dead as insurgency and terrorism. There was no clear path, and there were no clear sources of information anymore: the opposing blocs of the post-Israeli invasion had been scuttled by the end of cooperation with Jordan and anti-Syrian PLO diplomacy, the USSR was preoccupied with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the Gulf states had their attention and resources focused on the Iran-Iraq War, Fatah and the PFLP had never been less connected to their base of refugees, and there was no theater for consistent attacks against Israel.

There was one bastion of success amidst all this failure, born less from culture than a lack of alternatives. The drive to control civil society in the West Bank and Gaza—unions in particular—began to absorb the idle energy and resources of Fatah and the PFLP after they were mostly uprooted from Lebanon in 1982. Fatah in particular—guided by old guard leader Khalil al-Wazir—began to invest in student and women’s organizations alongside unions, making the youth organizations known as *shabiba* nearly omnipresent.<sup>99</sup> Universities became arenas for inter-factional competition and political contestation. The increasingly strategy-focused character of student politics at Birzeit University, Bethlehem University, and al-Najah University became critical sources of political information for the Palestinian parties.<sup>100</sup> Clandestine military work was still pursued in parallel—though with far less success, again due to the lack of operational expertise and investment in training.<sup>101</sup> Wazir imagined a role for mass action in bringing direct pressure to bear on the occupation, a belief that the rest of Fatah would soon share.

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<sup>99</sup> Cobban, “The PLO and the ‘Intifada.’” 218.

<sup>100</sup> Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.; Author interview with Birzeit University professor, 2023.

<sup>101</sup> Yezid Sayigh, “Palestinian Armed Struggle: Means and Ends,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, no. 1 (1986): 104.

The PFLP, meanwhile, pursued competition in controlling civil society even as it pleaded with Fatah to unify their efforts in line with both their Marxist principles and their now nearly-impossible goal of a social revolution uprooting the Israeli state entirely. Like the original armed struggle, both groups began pursuing the same strategy for different reasons. But again, this was also due to a shared cultural trait: Fatah and the PFLP both continued to change strategies and tactics when faced with uncertainty, and the shift towards civil resistance after the failure in Lebanon was no exception, also reflecting Fatah's shift towards negotiation after Black September.

Despite these different immediate goals, before 1988, Fatah insisted any Palestinian state in the West Bank would be a phase leading up to an eventual liberation of all of Palestine. Even after the Amman Accords, Fatah leaders continued to refer to securing a state in the Occupied Territories as a phased strategy. It's impossible to know the mind of Yasser Arafat, but interviews with Fatah leaders close to him included repeated assertions that any political move away from the total liberation of Palestine was practical in the pursuit of that eventual goal; as Shimon Peres would later put it, "Please tell them that there are many who tell us not to talk with Arafat. He cannot be trusted. He changes his mind. He must create credibility... We are dealing with a fox. I'm starting to be concerned about whether the man is serious. I don't want to be his victim."<sup>102</sup> The PFLP and Fatah most likely had the approximately same vision for an eventual secular binational Palestine—albeit with some differences in economic and social policy—but due to their cultural differences, approached this goal in radically different ways.

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<sup>102</sup> Ofer Aderet, "What I Fear Is a Palestinian State. Yitzhak Rabin Will Not Accept It," *Haaretz*, February 14, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

### **Strategy 1975 – 1987**

In the decade under study Fatah and the PFLP faced near-identical conditions, as they did between 1965 and 1975. Their strategies diverged nonetheless, just as they did in the previous decade, because of organizational culture. But strategy is iterative, such that minor differences in strategy the decade prior became increasingly large strategic deviations by the 1980s. Though both the PFLP and Fatah began their struggle with strategies of insurgency and terrorism, by 1987 Fatah had given up on violence entirely to focus on negotiation while the PFLP had changed their approach to mass revolution from spectacular acts of violence to investing in the infrastructure of civil resistance. These were changes born of the contradiction inherent in Palestinian strategy, wherein the demands of international politics and power relations contradicted completely the political goals of the Palestinian refugees. Which path each militant organization chose was a product of their organizational culture: which sources of information they prioritized and how they attempted to convert that new information into action.

Terrorism—commonplace among both the PFLP and Fatah in the previous decade—ends for the PFLP in 1976 after a disastrous hijacking attempt resulted in numerous of its fighters being killed. Fatah had already stopped using terrorism in 1975 but started again as part of a larger attempt to assert itself as a relevant force in 1980 to secure greater negotiation leverage. This ended quickly as successfully catching Israel's attention increasingly incentivized careful defense and deterrence over terrorizing civilians inside Israel. Fatah adopted terrorism under uncertainty and abandoned it relatively quickly once conditions changed, reflecting its dynamic culture. The end of the PFLP's terrorism was less culturally driven and more a military necessity after a string of

tactical failures—though their dynamic culture likely also made them more prone to pivot and accept it wasn't having the desired effect.

Insurgency had long been the central feature of Palestinian strategy. The discourse of “armed struggle” had become central to the Palestinian militias, to the extent it was difficult to imagine them giving it up even as it became obvious it was not likely to succeed. Even Fatah's moves towards negotiation held insurgency as the source of leverage and pressure. But after losing their last existing base bordering Israel in 1982, despite some attempts to re-enter, by 1985 Fatah gave up on its foundational strategy that was so core to its early success. This was a result of Fatah's culture as a whole: it required both the dynamic culture to change when faced with uncertainty and the floating culture to abandon the strategy that Palestinian refugees explicitly preferred. The PFLP, meanwhile, were wholesale committed to an armed revolution; strategies of terrorism or civil resistance were intended to mobilize support for insurgency as their main strategic pillar. Like Fatah's floating culture allowing them to abandon armed struggle, continued insurgency was due to the PFLP's anchored culture—refugees still hoped for an armed revolution that would deliver them to their lost homes in historic Palestine. This culturally derived strategic divide also guided how Fatah and the PFLP approached the crisis in Lebanon, with the former pushing conciliation while the latter escalated. Fatah was fighting the Lebanese Civil War while the PFLP was fighting *in* the Lebanese Civil War. For the PFLP, the battle against Maronite forces was as critical as the fight against Israel; for Fatah, Lebanese politics were a distraction to be muted rather than an issue to be contested.

The cultural drive to follow social information led the PFLP into a contradiction among the public opinion of Palestinian refugees: they reviled intra-Palestinian conflict, but at the same time wanted to maintain insurgency as the central Palestinian strategy. This was fine when Fatah was still using insurgency, but as the PLO began accepting extremely conciliatory terms to work with Jordan, the PFLP felt it had to resist their influence and joined the PNSF. The PNSF's actual competition with Fatah and the PLO was so unpopular, however, that the PFLP went right back to the PLO, to be sidelined in perpetuity. The dynamic of contradictory social information became a larger problem for anchored groups as polling became synonymous with social information from Palestinians. Whereas before, factions relied on recruitment, the rank-and-file, Palestinian presses, and word-of-mouth to gather social information, now it could be accurately and scientifically conveyed in precise numbers. Polls are fallible, but only marginally; more importantly, polls represent a snapshot and public opinion is malleable. Polling's ability to dominate social information introduced new problems for anchored groups in trying to follow the trends of social information, first exemplified by the PFLP giving up anti-PLO rejectionism only a few years before it would gain serious popular purchase in the West Bank and particularly Gaza. This engenders a worthwhile counterfactual: could the PFLP have become, within the PNSF, a meaningful challenger to the PLO once their negotiation strategy began losing popularity? It's a reasonable possibility, but more importantly shows the PFLP were reacting to, rather than leading or trying to actively shape, Palestinian public opinion.

Negotiation as a strategy changed little for either group; it remained the only feasible path for Fatah just as it remained beyond the pale for the PFLP. The relationship

to negotiation best displays the impact of their different embeddedness on their strategy.

If Fatah had prioritized social information and the refugee community's preferences, it could not have pursued negotiations as consistently and persistently as it did.

Simultaneously, if the PFLP had prioritized interorganizational information and the international community's preferences, even just those of its international sponsors, it could not have sustained insurgency as a strategy—it was too often an inconvenience for Syria particularly, the Iraqis had become preoccupied with fighting Iran, and as Fatah had deftly ascertained years prior, the broader international system was trending towards American hegemony anyway. Ultimately, the mid-1980s were the strategic nadir for both the PFLP and Fatah, and their behavior in these moments is thereby more culturally derived than in moments of strength—when there's no rational hope for victory, and there really was quite little for the Palestinians by 1987, all options are equally bad, so culture-based preferences are all that remain. It's telling, then, that the enhanced effect of culture led Fatah deeper into pursuing negotiation, and the PFLP into continued insurgency.

The shift towards civil resistance towards the end of this period is the most significant strategic shift of the 1980s. Communists in the West Bank and Gaza had long been attempting to mobilize civil resistance towards worker's rights, though were unable to achieve a true mass mobilization. The PFLP and Fatah did not pursue civil resistance for ideological reasons, as the communists did, and for different reasons themselves. Both were making changes in uncertainty, as their organizational culture predicts, and both were seeking to use civil resistance to buttress their central strategies; but these strategies were diametrically opposed. The PFLP hoped still to foment a mass insurgency across

historic Palestine, while Fatah was aiming to secure negotiation leverage, both by the strategic logic of civil resistance driving upward pressure on the occupation and by seizing control of the network of institutions in the Occupied Territories.

Over years of culturally-informed strategic iteration and lessons learned, Fatah had become a team of clever diplomats while the PFLP had formed into a cell of active agitators. As Fatah's Salah Khalaf writes,

Faced with a situation of conflict within a given country, more often than not we opted to safeguard our relations with the regime in power at the expense of the masses who contested it...What [Fatah] gained in 'respectability' it lost in militancy: We have acquired a taste for dealing with governments and men of power.<sup>103</sup>

Fatah's floating culture ensured they could and would not follow the demands of their people if it meant sacrificing their ability to work with, rather than against, existing powers. Meanwhile, the anchored PFLP was torn between their primary base in the refugee community that would not and could not accept any recognition of Israel and a community inside Palestine that demanded immediate rights and relief only Israel could grant. The PFLP's coming decline was due in part to this dynamic as they could not carry forward the negotiations Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories wanted. Most critically from the perspective of organizational culture, the PFLP were anchored in the refugee communities of 1948. Though they'd done work in the West Bank and Gaza, they lacked the resources to meaningfully proselytize the population and faced ideological competition from the competent communist organizers. But these could have been overcome if not for the fundamental conflict of interest between people in Palestine and refugees outside; defeating Israel wholesale remained the strategic hope of the

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<sup>103</sup>Iyad and Rouleau, *My Home, My Land*. 221.

refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria even as it became militarily impossible, if it ever was even possible. So the PFLP had to continue the armed struggle, or at least the medial goal of broader revolution, to keep the hope that constituted it alive, even as doing so spelled political disaster. Fatah, on the other hand, would come to reap the rewards of years of diplomacy using leverage built on the backs of the organizing work mostly performed by the Palestinian communists in years prior.

### **The Palestinian National Movement: The First Intifada and the Oslo Accords**

At the beginning of 1988, the Intifada and civil resistance promised endless possibilities. For Fatah, there was great potential for a negotiated settlement and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, born out of the pressure of civil resistance on the occupation. For the PFLP, the Intifada was just the mass mobilization they had long hoped for, and the remaining task was to militarize it into a people's war that would liberate all of historic Palestine and allow their main base of refugees to return to their homes. As ever, due to their different cultures, Fatah followed the interorganizational information demanding negotiation, and the PFLP followed the social information pushing insurgency and revolution. World politics disrupted both these plans. The collapse of the USSR and the broader influence of the socialist bloc put the PFLP's international and popular support into a fatal death spiral, while the resultant U.S. hegemony and the war on Iraq scuttled Fatah's diplomatic strategy. Nonetheless, due to a perfect storm of Fatah's weakness, the success of the Intifada, and the rise of the more radical Hamas, Israel acceded to negotiations with Fatah, concluding the Oslo Accords in 1993.

These events were also backdrop to the incubation of Hamas, which would quickly become the second biggest faction next to Fatah because of its rejection of the terms of the Oslo Accords, its grassroots origins in Gaza and the West Bank, and its support for the use of violence against Israel. Though originally engaged in civil resistance during the First Intifada, Hamas, having an anchored organizational culture, represented the significant minority of Palestinians who still believed in armed struggle

and opposed either the two-state solution entirely or at least the terms of Oslo as its basis. Increased Israeli violence against Palestinians after Oslo wrought demands for revenge and more violent strategy, social information which fueled Hamas' strategy of terrorism. While their initial use of violence was driven by following this social information, particularly public opinion polling, it would continue due to their static organizational culture, which drove the continuation of violent strategy under persistent uncertainty. The First Intifada and early Oslo period discussed in this chapter should be understood as primarily driven by changes in global politics. More so than any other change in information, the most important change is that by 1990, the Palestinian issue becomes relegated to the sidelines of international attention. This was the result of a confluence of factors explored below, but its importance for all three organizations is stark: it left Fatah adrift diplomatically and strategically without the ability to muster or manipulate international support, it ideologically discredited the PFLP as their most important state sponsors collapsed or were militarily defeated, and it produced the perfect political and psychological conditions for a radical and pro-violence organization like Hamas to emerge and gain traction.

In this chapter, the introduction of Hamas serves as an entry point into a larger theoretical investigation of how differences in reactivity affect strategy. Hamas is the only organization under study coded as static; as this chapter will show, uncertainty does not drive Hamas to reconsider its strategy but instead to repeatedly double-down on violence as the primary means of achieving its goals. Hamas' commitment to violence, and particularly terrorism, persists even as parts of the organization try to change direction. Culturally prone to inertia, these voices in favor of change are sidelined

repeatedly. This dynamic contrasts with Fatah and the PFLP, who show again during this period the penchant for often rapid strategic changes in dynamic organizational cultures. This chapter also suggests a theoretical question that will continue into the next chapter. What happens to a Resister when the inertia of its static culture is contradicted by the demands of its social constituency prioritized by its anchored culture? Hamas is faced by this challenge throughout its existence: how can it square its internal culture favoring persistent violence strategy with a Palestinian public that wants peace? Of course, static organizations can still change strategy, and Hamas does observe periods of non-violence or restricted violence. But during pauses or critical moments when the public mood seems malleable or unclear, Hamas repeatedly returns to suicide bombing in particular as a boilerplate response to any perceived opportunity. From a rational perspective in hindsight, it seems obvious they should have stopped or changed approach as their popularity sharply declines. That Hamas never fully gives up on terrorism, in this period and the future, is strong evidence for the effect of its culture on strategy. This dynamic is made even clearer in contrast to both the unpopular PFLP trying everything to reclaim its lost social standing and the increasingly popular Fatah giving up whatever it has to offer to finally close a deal with Israel.

Figure 8: Fatah Strategy 1987 – 1994

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Weakness and distance from theater of war]	N/A [International demands to renounce terrorism and Reasonablist quest for prestige]
<i>Insurgency</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Weakness and distance from theater of war]	N/A [Lesson from Lebanon that military victory is impossible]
<i>Negotiation</i>	(1974) –	1993 Oslo Accords	(Strong inter-organizational information)	N/A [Continued belief in negotiation as only potential for victory]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	(1982) – 1992	Regular strikes and protests set by UNCs	(Experimentation under uncertainty)	Strong social and interorganizational information

Figure 9: PFLP Strategy 1987 – 1994

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Weakness and distance from theater of war]	N/A [Anti-violence social ethic of First Intifada]
<i>Insurgency</i>	(1978) –	Armed assault on Kfar Ruppin (9/2/1989)	(Strong social, interorganizational information)	N/A [persisted due to popular belief in primacy of “armed struggle” as strategy]
<i>Negotiation</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strong belief non-violence could not open Israel to refugees of ‘48]	N/A [Competition with Fatah over desirability of negotiation]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	(1982) – 1992	Regular strikes set by UNC’s  Protests organized by UNC’s	(Experimentation under uncertainty)	Strong social and tactical information

Figure 10: Hamas Strategy 1987 – 1994

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	1990–	Aluminum plant stabbings (12/14/90)  Mehola Junction bombing (4/16/93)	Strong social, tactical information	N/A [Strategic inertia of Resister culture]
<i>Insurgency</i>	1989 –	Small-scale armed attacks on Israeli police and military outposts, kidnapping and killing IDF soldiers	Strong social, tactical information	N/A [Strategic inertia of Resister culture]
<i>Negotiation</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strong belief non-violence could not open Israel to refugees of '48, particularly in Gaza]	N/A [Competition with Fatah over desirability of negotiation]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	1987 – 1992	Strikes and protests declared independent of and in competition with UNCs, esp. 1992 strikes against Madrid Conference in Gaza	Strong social information	Strong social and tactical information

### The First Intifada, 1988 – 1990

#### *Islamist Transition to Violence and Hamas' Formation*

Before moving forward into the events of the First Intifada that culminate in the Oslo Accords, I must first move backwards and introduce a critical new entrant into the Palestinian national movement: Hamas. Hamas' formation set its anchored and static organizational culture, a culture that would produce continuous strategic inertia while capturing many of the hearts and minds of Palestinians living in historic Palestine.

Hamas's roots are in the Muslim Brotherhood Society in Palestine, an offshoot of the movement found in Egypt in 1928. After 1967, seeing weakness in the Arab nationalist and secular socialist models, Palestinian Islamists in the Brotherhood took two tracks to press Islamist politics. Most Palestinian Islamists, in line with the official Muslim Brotherhood position, rejected military action in favor of proselytizing Islam and constructing robust Islamic social institutions. In this they found great success: they built Islamic schools, hospitals, universities, and libraries, among other community-based initiatives. Other Islamists, far fewer, joined or cooperated with Fatah in pushing the armed struggle against Israel. Fatah's lack of ideology made them plenty welcome, but constitutively unable to pursue their ideological goals, leading those that survived and remained free to join one of the other burgeoning internationalist Islamist movements in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

The institutional track proved to be so successful that the Muslim Brotherhood began to compete with the PLO for influence. Islamist candidates in the late 1970s student-union elections—elections Fatah and the PFLP were used to dominating—saw growing success, belying the concomitant growth in Islamist political and social influence.<sup>2</sup> Israel permitted the growth of Islamic institutions to try to develop non-PLO political leadership in the occupied territories; they were especially happy to ignore the Islamists as increasing militancy in the movement in the early 1980s led to some attacks on PLO supporters. Despite the trending violence, before 1987 the Muslim Brotherhood not only explicitly rejected violent resistance to Israel, but even non-violent resistance,

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<sup>1</sup> A favorite ideologue of al-Qaeda, Abdullah Azzam, was one such Palestinian that fought with Fatah and later joined the Afghani Mujahideen in the war against the Soviets. He was killed in 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford University Press, 1997). 628.

claiming protests merely released energy that should be preserved. The now fairly large base of Palestinian Islamists did not accept this position, however, and it was soon to change in response.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamist movement's lead figure, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, began pushing violence as a strategy as early as 1984 when he was arrested for illegal weapon possession. The following year he created an intelligence unit, Majd, to expose and punish collaboration with Israel as well as un-Islamic behavior by Palestinians, namely women wearing non-Islamic attire and shops selling alcohol.<sup>4</sup> The focus on social violence reflected the seriousness of Islamic ideology among members of Majd, but also their military weakness. Any Palestinian in Gaza or the West Bank at this time had seen the repeated attempts by Fatah and the PFLP, among others, to launch an insurgency. They had also seen these organizations repeatedly defeated, their networks uprooted, and their members imprisoned or killed. Thus, the Majd and Islamists in general were hesitant to launch a violent struggle against Israel that may lead to the same fate. It was only the beginning of the First Intifada which would shock the Islamists into action and drive them to formally create a military organization to fight Israel in Hamas.

Hamas was chartered in 1988 to answer the growing calls for an active Islamist resistance to Israel. Hamas is an Arabic acronym for "*Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya*," or "Islamic Resistance Movement" in English, but like Fatah choosing an acronym that also means "victory," the name was chosen partially because *hamas* can be translated as "zealous bravery." The charter was written by isolated and inexperienced

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<sup>3</sup> Abdullah al-Sa'afin, "The Organizational and Intellectual Structure of the Hamas Movement," *Al-Hayat*, November 27, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Elie Rekhess, "The West Bank and the Gaza Strip," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey, Volume X, 1986* (Routledge, 1988). 221.

cadres in Gaza, reflected in the naïve version of world history and simplistic Islamist ideology it presented. The charter did not provide for organizational structure, preferred means of resistance, or even clear goals to achieve beyond an Islamic Palestine.<sup>5</sup> The organization for its first years relied heavily on loosely organized street gangs. The fear of Israeli counterinsurgency, driven by Fatah and the PFLP's experience, was validated after Hamas kidnapped and killed two IDF soldiers, as nearly the entire leadership, as well as 250 affiliated activists, were rounded up and thrown in prison. Prison turned out to be very good for Hamas, as the arrested leaders spent their incarceration planning organizational and political changes to Hamas that would constitute it as a powerful force in Palestinian politics.

By 1990, Hamas had agreed on a political-military separation, a collective leadership expressed in a politburo, and a more flexible political-ideological stance. Combined with their pre-war political and social mobilization through Islamic institutions—institutions that would help the organization survive and rebuild after decapitation in ways Fatah and the PFLP were constitutively incapable of—Hamas is clearly an organization anchored in the Muslim communities of Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas was also markedly decentralized: they allowed agents to run amok, clashing with Fatah and the IDF frequently. The leadership trusted ideological parity to maintain strategic cohesion, even as ideological agents violated orders for restraint. Their initial capabilities were focused mostly in very specific means, particularly acid, Molotov cocktails, grenades, and homemade explosives.<sup>6</sup> This initial investment was underscored

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<sup>5</sup> al-Sa'afin, "The Organizational and Intellectual Structure of the Hamas Movement."

<sup>6</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 630.; START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism). (2022). *Global Terrorism Database 1970 - 2020* [data file]. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

and deepened by the 1992 exile of Hamas leaders to South Lebanon, where their contacts with Hezbollah fed them expertise and training on using car and suicide bombs; perhaps more importantly, they shared ideas with Hamas about their experience of great effectiveness with these tactics, especially against Israel and the United States.<sup>7</sup> They also had a high investment in ideology, best expressed in initial leaders' fear that new recruits would, "...not know how to perfectly recite the Holy Qur'an, smoke, [and] fail to read the letters of [Muslim Brotherhood founder] Hasan al-Banna."<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these qualities make Hamas, contrary to Fatah and the PFLP, a static organization: decentralized, investing initially in explosives and other non-fungible capabilities, and heavily invested in ideology. Hamas' role in the First Intifada was limited, however. It was still developing its organization, a process to be completed mostly by leaders exiled to Amman and Damascus, and faced constant repression from the Israelis; the PLO remained the major force in Palestinian politics.

### *Initiating the Intifada*

The First Intifada began in late 1987 as the culmination of three independently innocuous events. First, in October, several members of the then-obscure Islamic militant organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad were killed by the IDF, leading to demonstrations and street confrontations with occupying Israel forces. Then, in November, two fighters from one of the Syrian-backed rejectionist Palestinian organizations used motorized hang-gliders to infiltrate Israel from Syrian-controlled territory in Lebanon, landing at a

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<sup>7</sup> Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> al-Sa'afin, "The Organizational and Intellectual Structure of the Hamas Movement."

settlement in northern Israel before killing six soldiers and wounding another seven.<sup>9</sup> Then, in December, a car crash that killed several Palestinian workers ignited protests amidst rumors it was an intentional murder.<sup>10</sup>

These three events, in combination with the nadir of PLO political influence internationally, deepening economic problems among Palestinians, and encroaching Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, produced a series of riots and demonstrations that quickly spread across the West Bank and Gaza. These were not merely aggrieved people, but a populace trained by harsh experience in prisons, protests, and street confrontations. By 1985, 40% of adult men had spent at least one night in prison.<sup>11</sup> Palestinians inside the West Bank and Gaza had also benefited from the focus on tertiary education both from Islamic and secular civil society, but without jobs available to trained professionals, all education did was further radicalize students and give them an intellectual and physical space to share ideas and grievances.<sup>12</sup>

This context is what turned a spark into a flame that soon became fueled by the institutional support of the PLO. Fatah and the PFLP's investment in civil society paid off as now they could promote, albeit from outside, local leaders based on their support for the PLO, a political position they had previously succeeded in making central to a candidate's legitimacy in the mayoral elections. A 1985-1986 crackdown on the West Bank and Gaza ended up a positive force for the Palestinians: short sentences for non-

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "Syria-Based Group Says It Staged Israel Raid," *The New York Times*, November 27, 1987, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/27/world/syria-based-group-says-it-staged-israel-raid.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Israeli Acquitted in Traffic Mishap That Sparked Arab Riots," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1992, sec. World & Nation, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-03-07-mn-3555-story.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Aronson, *Creating Facts : Israel, Palestinians and the West Bank* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987), <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1648398>. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 608.

violent offenses turned Israeli prisons into training camps for a new generation of Palestinian activists who learned critical organizing skills for clandestine and semi-legal work.<sup>13</sup>

Internationally, the competition between Jordan and Israel for social influence in the West Bank particularly only served to increase the appeal of independent Palestinian nationalism, which only the PLO could meaningfully use to their advantage. The PLO's goal was not to mobilize the population, work that non-PLO community activists had been doing for decades, but instead to capture and co-opt that mobilized population into the neopatrimonial network using the massive pile of money the PLO had been receiving from the Gulf states throughout the 1980s. This was true of Fatah, at least—the PFLP, trying to pursue the populist agenda of mobilization, nonetheless fell into neopatrimonial patterns. But instead of PLO funds from the Gulf, it was done with money from INGOs, charitable donations, and governments supporting the PFLP's various semi-legitimate fronts.<sup>14</sup> It is critical to recall that the PFLP's interests and connections were still in the refugee communities outside the West Bank and Gaza—it had tried to make inroads for decades, but the political and social outlook of the Palestinians inside was completely different from Palestinians outside. This primarily centered on the prioritization of potential concessions; refugees tended to be more radical and militant because any solution that did not include Israel's defeat necessarily meant they could not return to

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<sup>13</sup> Julie M. Norman, *The Palestinian Prisoners Movement: Resistance and Disobedience* (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 612-613.

their original homes.<sup>15</sup> It was fortuitous for all involved that this competitive atmosphere was mostly resolved by 1988.

By 1988, both the PFLP and Fatah had set up their organizations in the West Bank to undertake civil resistance. Khalil al-Wazir, still Arafat's most trusted lieutenant, had built a strong Fatah organization in the West Bank and Gaza in the previous few years. The PFLP had been undertaking this reorganization even longer, dating back as far as 1979.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, before 1988, neither organization saw civil resistance as the center-piece of their strategy. The PFLP politburo even published a December 1987 celebration of their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary that made no mention of the ongoing protests.<sup>17</sup> Arafat and the other exiled PLO militias were quick to assert that the spontaneous uprising was actually their plan all along.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, institutional building blocks in place, Fatah and the PFLP—alongside the DFLP and Palestinian Communist Party (PCP)—established the Unified National Commands (UNCs), two parallel leadership councils for Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>19</sup> The UNCs were mostly bodies intended to coordinate mass action by setting strike days, encouraging boycotts, calling out specific Israeli-made products, encouraging social solidarity, and generally providing guidelines for civil resistance. The constituent organizations had differing reasons for pushing civil resistance, however. Besides the PCP, they all were essentially riding a wave of strategy formed from below and using it

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<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinians in Lebanon: Harsh Present, Uncertain Future," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 1 (1995): 51.

<sup>16</sup> Helena Cobban, "The PLO and the 'Intifada,'" *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (1990): 209.

<sup>17</sup> "20th Anniversary of the Founding of the PFLP," *Filastin Al-Thawra*, December 17, 1987.

<sup>18</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, January 14, 1988.

<sup>19</sup> The PCP are not under study and so do not merit further exploration, but it's worth noting that many of the tactics and institutional connections of the Intifada came from the PCP's groundwork in the preceding decade.

to their own ends. For the PFLP, riding this wave was a predictable cultural response to social information, even if it was coming from outside their central base of refugees. For Fatah, following the strategy dictated by social information was more surprising given their cultural preference for interorganizational information, which was mixed on the Intifada. Material and moral support from Iraq and Kuwait were marred by near-universal crackdowns on sympathy protests and strikes across the Arab world, including in Iraq and Kuwait.<sup>20</sup> It was not until the spring of 1988 that most Arab states even acknowledged the Intifada as anything novel or unique.<sup>21</sup>

More in line with what Fatah's organizational culture predicts, Fatah immediately attempted to use the Intifada as a cudgel to garner Arab diplomatic and financial support. Even as early as mid-December 1987, Fatah began pushing Egypt, Syria, and Jordan to coalesce a diplomatic strategy to negotiate a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. This was particularly the work of Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's top negotiator, who was arguing alongside foreign friends of the PLO that Fatah should form a government-in-exile to strengthen its diplomatic credentials, noting also, "there is a big difference between the discourse of a state and the discourse of a revolution."<sup>22</sup> The Soviet Union and Egypt happily endorsed plans for negotiations under the condition of the PLO accepting UNSCR 242, but the U.S. was intransigent, with Secretary of State George Shultz refusing to meet with diaspora Palestinians.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "The Arab World," *Middle East Report*, no. 152 (1988): 51–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012109>.

<sup>21</sup> Erika G. Alin, "Dynamics of the Palestinian Uprising: An Assessment of Causes, Character, and Consequences," ed. Rex Brynen et al., *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 4 (1994): 487, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422027>.

<sup>22</sup> Samih Shbib, "The Palestinian Resistance-Political Report," *Shu'un Filastiniyya*, no. 179 (February 1988). 90.

<sup>23</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 617.

The PFLP, for its part, was still hoping to convert the Intifada into a violent mass uprising. They were critical of Arafat's moves towards the U.S. and particularly upset by plans to accept UNSCR 242. In the PFLP view, civil resistance was meant to be mere prelude to armed insurrection, as it was in the Russian Revolution.<sup>24</sup> George Habash published an article in 1989 to this effect, emphasizing that Israel would never agree to a true right of return for refugees and calling for a "Chinese solution" to the problem with Israel. The article in general reflected the Maoist analysis that the PFLP had long espoused, albeit more politically mature.<sup>25</sup> It also reflected the PFLP's continued pursuit of the interests of the refugee community, as they saw them: civil resistance was good for mobilizing people in the Occupied Territories but relied on pressuring the Israelis to withdraw or make concessions in negotiation. As the PFLP saw it, refugees' hopes for return still relied on Israel's military defeat, and Israel could not be non-violently pressured out of existence. The PFLP's anchored culture led them to follow the social information they could gather, but this was mostly limited to the refugee community, whose interests were not served by an Israeli withdrawal but rather an Israeli defeat. Despite these deep strategic disagreements, , both Fatah and the PFLP played along nicely and refrained from pushing negotiation or insurgency in ways that would undercut the civil resistance of the Intifada for the first few years of the First Intifada.

Undoubtedly, the individual given the most responsibility for leading the Intifada was Fatah's Khalil al-Wazir. He was adamant that the Intifada remain non-violent at its outset, curtailing and then ending cross-border guerilla raids, which had been severely

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<sup>24</sup> George Habash, *Four Articles on the Uprising* (Information Department, PFLP, 1989). 18.

<sup>25</sup> George Habash. 5.

limited in frequency and scope anyway, while stressing that protestors should not use or carry firearms.<sup>26</sup> Abu Jihad did more than any other single person to keep the Intifada going through its first few months, and the tactics he developed became central to the strategy of the Intifada. But, in a serious blow to Fatah, he was assassinated in Tunis on April 16, 1988. Nonetheless, the First Intifada continued: the mass mobilization it entailed was not the work of any individual who could be killed, but the combination of social solidarity and a strong network of community-based institutions, especially local popular committees as nodes of coordination for local resistance.

Hamas, on the other hand, constructed its own institutions independent of the UNC's. It was able to do so on its own mostly because it had developed a deep supply of capable and trustworthy leaders who could consistently and quickly replace arrested leaders.<sup>27</sup> By 1992, it was second only to Fatah in size and influence. This competition, as well as strategic and ideological divisions, led to deep animosity between supporters of the two organizations, sometimes spilling into street violence. But strategically Hamas asserted itself somewhat gently, choosing not to outright criticize or try to supplant the PLO, which would surely alienate many Palestinians who still asserted the importance of unity. They did, however, call their own strike days independent of the UNC's, hold Islamic political demonstrations and discussions, and host university-based political events.<sup>28</sup> The universities were particularly useful arenas for Hamas, such that Israel began forcibly shuttering them in 1988—the largest, Birzeit University, was shut down

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<sup>26</sup> Khalil al-Wazir, *Abu Jihad: Conversations about the Uprising* (Tunis, 1989). 119-21.

<sup>27</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 632.

<sup>28</sup> Ziad Abu-Amr, " Hamas: A Historical and Political Background," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (1993): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538077>.

until 1992.<sup>29</sup> Hamas's anchored culture drove them to follow social information, which pushed civil resistance and unity during the First Intifada. That they remained formally independent was a result of relatively greater independent institutional capacity due to their existing Islamic civil society organizations.<sup>30</sup>

Fatah continued the diplomatic track, failing to make peace with Syria but successfully pressuring Jordan to abandon its claims to the West Bank at an emergency Arab League session in June 1988. Subsequently, Arab relief funds sent to the West Bank and Gaza became the PLO's purview, a significant boon totaling hundreds of millions of dollars per year. These advances did little to convince the U.S., who remained intransigent on negotiations. This did not change Fatah's approach, though. They still believed that the U.S. was the real force to be dealt with and still believed that the PLO could find a diplomatic position that the U.S. could accept, even as Arafat began hinting that the PLO would soon unilaterally declare a Palestinian state.<sup>31</sup> Arab support was relatively unified, so much so that Jordan had sacrificed its claims to the West Bank and thereby hundreds of millions in aid. This was strong interorganizational information, which Fatah read as a singular opportunity to seize the international legitimacy they were culturally disposed to see as singularly important.

With this confidence, at the 19<sup>th</sup> Palestinian National Council session in November 1988, Arafat declared Palestinian independence. In this declaration, he renounced terrorism, accepted UNSCR 242, promised the formation of a government-in-exile, implicitly recognized Israel, and committed to coexistence by recognizing the 1947

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<sup>29</sup> William E. Schmidt, "Israel to Permit Reopening of Last Arab University Closed by Army," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1992, sec. World.

<sup>30</sup> Abu-Amr, "Hamas."

<sup>31</sup> Yasser Arafat, "Editorial," *Filastin Al-Thawra*, August 14, 1988.

UN partition plan. The PFLP raised objections to accepting UNSCR 242 but were defeated in a vote and resigned themselves to voting yes on the program. This was the final defeat of the PFLP in the PLO. In previous years, such a vote would have led them to boycott the PNC, as they had numerous times before when negotiation was on the table. But they were still weakened after the episode with the PNSF, and no longer had the political weight to resist Fatah in the PLO nor the independent base to leave it. They still lacked deeper connections in what was apparently becoming a new Palestinian state as the Intifada raged on under their partial direction.

In terms of information, the Intifada in 1988 and 1989 was heavily slanted towards social information. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were unified in a clarion call to the PLO: civil resistance is the way forward. Palestinians quickly developed a discourse of “the Intifada,” which came to mean, at the time, civil disobedience to the Israeli military regime. The clarity of this discourse made it easy to point out defections towards violence; though as Israel cracked down on the grassroots networks of organizers and UNC leaders, curtailing these defections became nearly impossible despite how obvious their disobedience to the idea of the Intifada was. Interorganizational information was at first scarce, but as the Intifada went on and Arab publics agitated in support of the Palestinians, Arab regimes began to support the Palestinians materially and diplomatically. This support included provisions for strike funds and direct payments to victims of Israeli police brutality; though these were limited, they indicated some strategic support.<sup>32</sup> But the Arab regimes’ money also indicated their support for negotiation, which encouraged Fatah to continue their pursuit

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<sup>32</sup> Rex Brynen, *Echoes Of The Intifada: Regional Repercussions Of The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, 1st edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 117.

of a deal. Thus, in 1989 and 1990, civil resistance was pushed by both social and interorganizational information, cementing it in those years as Fatah, Hamas, and the PFLP's strategic centerpiece. Meanwhile, the U.S. and Europe remained aloof, complicating Fatah's plans.

Tactical information was limited, however: the Israeli crackdown was so reflexive and, at times, ludicrously rigid that the only message being communicated was that Israel would respond harshly to any expression of Palestinian self-determination.<sup>33</sup> This is strategically useful information but does not give any semblance of a specific plan to pursue. If the Israelis are equally violent towards civil resistance as they are terrorism, the question of which to pursue remains as uncertain as ever, just with the added caveat that they are an intransigent enemy. Moreover, the unity of action for all groups made tactical feedback less clear—any success could be attributed widely. The partial exception is Hamas, which was able to show an independent power by declaring their own strike days, but nonetheless coordinating them with the UNCs eventually.<sup>34</sup> The abundance of social information at this time, abetted by interorganizational information and especially abundant relative to tactical information, drove civil resistance. But for Fatah, the social information pushing civil resistance was secondary to the interorganizational information supporting its negotiation-cum-civil resistance strategy.

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<sup>33</sup> A famous example of this rigidity in the face of even minor infractions is covered in the experimental documentary film *The Wanted 18* (2014) which tells the story of the intense IDF campaign to prevent Palestinians producing their own milk from 18 dairy cows purchased from a kibbutz.

<sup>34</sup> Khalid Farraj, "The First Intifada: Hope and the Loss of Hope," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 1 (185) (2017): 86–97.

*The State of Palestine*

Though Wazir's intention was to eventually arm the Intifada, Arafat's attempts to do so were not as canny or effective as Wazir, and after the latter's assassination, attempts to escalate to insurgency did not escape the planning stage.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the grassroots began more actively resisting PLO influence. Even as the PLO described the UNCs as merely an organ of the PLO, they occasionally disobeyed orders or took independent action, most egregiously by calling for boycotts of meetings with U.S. officials while the PLO was pushing dialogue with them. Fatah—now synonymous with Arafat—rapidly replaced killed or demoted cadres in the occupied territories with sycophants and charlatans seeking graft, many of whom used the money for building villas or other corrupt personal spending instead of supporting the Intifada.<sup>36</sup> By 1990, representatives of the PFLP, Fatah, and other PLO organizations had essentially supplanted the UNCs. Less experienced leaders who were more susceptible to taking orders from the leadership in Tunis replaced the grassroots leaders as they were arrested or killed.

Civil resistance suffered without support. Data on the frequency of demonstrations or strikes does not exist, but the declining number of Palestinians killed by the IDF shows the trend clearly: 289 and 285 Palestinians were killed in 1988 and 1989 respectively but dropped by more than 50% to 125 in 1990 and 91 in 1991.<sup>37</sup> This was due to two trends that spelled the coming end of civil resistance as a strategy. First,

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<sup>35</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 635.

<sup>36</sup> Abd-al-Rahim Mullah, "Interview with Member of PFLP Politburo," *Al-Hadaf*, July 15, 1990.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> "Fatalities in the First Intifada," B'Tselem, accessed November 6, 2023, [https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first\\_intifada\\_tables](https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables).

civil resistance always requires active support for communities being asked to forgo normal economic activity for political purposes. Two years of this had been exhausting, especially as corruption and the extension of patronage networks siloed funds that could have helped Palestinians suffering from the adverse economic effects of boycotts, strikes, and Israeli repression. Since Fatah's intended strategy was negotiation, requiring tight manipulation of pressure, control over the Intifada was more important than its perpetuation: it was better to spend money securing the loyalty of local notables and institutions than supporting the average Palestinian. Fatah's floating culture meant that social information in the form of demands for financial support to local communities was prone to being ignored, or at least discounted. Second, arrests and general Israeli repression loosened, if not destroyed, the organizations' control over its agents. This led to a marked increase in attacks on collaborators with Israel. Fatah, the PFLP, and especially Hamas all fielded paramilitaries to fight informants, but by the end of 1989 these groups were completely out of control and actively disobeying orders to restrain themselves. Moreover, the lapse in central control of the Intifada led to armed criminality and vigilantism against other Palestinians, including extortion rackets.<sup>38</sup>

Fatah's negotiation strategy was faring no better than civil disobedience. The Israelis were insisting on holding local elections for representatives to negotiate a final settlement, which the PLO obviously rejected as it explicitly excluded them as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinians. The PFLP was especially incensed at the proposal as the elections would exclude Palestinian refugees, their core base: constituted by their embeddedness in these refugee communities, the PFLP could not even consider

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<sup>38</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 637.

privileging West Bank and Gazan interests over theirs.<sup>39</sup> Fatah reaffirmed its belief that the U.S. was its real negotiating partner, though attempts at escalating the Intifada to add pressure were abortive; a call to return to armed struggle in the occupied territories merely forced them to do damage control with the annoyed Americans.<sup>40</sup> It is likely that such an escalation was possible with greater commitment, but Fatah was culturally inclined to follow interorganizational information demanding non-violence, even though clearly non-violent pressure was insufficient.

This dynamic came into acute focus in 1990 when the PLO refused to officially sanction an Iraqi-backed faction in its ranks after it had attempted a raid on Tel Aviv. The rank-and-file of most of the PLO organizations, Fatah being the only exception, were generally in favor of armed struggle and saw the civil resistance of the Intifada as leading naturally into an insurgency.<sup>41</sup> Despite Arafat's pre-eminence in the PLO, this overwhelming mood could not be ignored, and thereby the raid could not be officially condemned. Instead, Fatah denied PLO involvement and asserted their rejection of terrorism, which was not enough for the Americans, who subsequently suspended talks.

The Intifada was a fortuitous circumstance for the down-and-out PLO in 1988. Both Fatah and the PFLP, being culturally dynamic, seized on the opportunity to pivot strategies and quickly endorse and co-opt the Intifada, but the Intifada's popular and grassroots nature immediately produced contradictions. The PFLP were culturally committed to the political interests of refugees, which were often at odds with the political interests of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. This meant a continued

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<sup>39</sup> Sayigh. 638.

<sup>40</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, September 3, 1989.

<sup>41</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

strategy of insurgency, even if only latent; in practice, all this meant was their continued efforts to prevent local leadership that would supplant the PLO and thereby cut out the refugee issue. Fatah's floating culture and negotiation strategy produced equal contradictions. Any attempts to sustain the Intifada were marred by their efforts to prevent local leaders from arising and the concomitant corruption, and any attempts to escalate the Intifada were prevented or disavowed to protect Fatah's bargaining position. As Palestinians in the Occupied Territories demanded their rights, the PFLP were culturally inclined to privilege the perceived interests of refugees instead, and Fatah were culturally inclined to privilege the interests of the international community in general and the U.S. in particular. As a result, none of the strategies—civil resistance, insurgency, or negotiation—were able to fully function, with each undercutting the others at critical moments.

### **The Gulf Crisis and the Rise of Hamas, 1990 – 1992**

#### *The Gulf Crisis*

The diplomatic track was further stalled by Iraq. Since the beginning of the Intifada, Fatah and the PLO had mended and then strengthened relations with Iraq. Iraq, having now concluded the Iran-Iraq War, was offering enormous diplomatic and material support to the Palestinians, even promising military support against Israel.<sup>42</sup> Arab support for the Palestinians had remained meager, much to Arafat's chagrin, but Iraq was sending oil and guns to any state that would recognize the Palestinian declaration of

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<sup>42</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 640.

independence.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the lack of broad Arab financial support and the increasing costs of extending patronage to the occupied territories left the PLO a serious financial deficit.<sup>44</sup> Despite setbacks, Fatah still desperately wanted to negotiate with the Americans. This made the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 an awkward and confusing prospect for the PLO.

With protests in support of Iraq in Jordan and the occupied territories, the risk to the 300,000 Palestinians in Kuwait and Iraq, the dire need for Iraqi financial and military support, and the prospect of an American invasion, the PLO was caught between two impossible positions: Palestinians opposed occupation reflexively and recognized the injustice of Iraq occupying Kuwait but were also reflexively opposed to expanding American influence. After Hussein offered to link the Gulf crisis to the Israeli occupation, Arafat proposed a multilateral peace conference to resolve all Middle East issues and secure a U.S. withdrawal from the region alongside lifting sanctions against Iraq.<sup>45</sup> The PFLP took this as full-throated support for Iraq, a position it shared, even calling for confrontation with the newly stationed U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia.<sup>46</sup> Hamas, meanwhile, took a moderate approach by calling for an Iraqi withdrawal alongside a call for American withdrawal as their main source of funding was the Gulf sheikhdoms, but Palestinian grassroots sentiment was genuinely pro-Iraq.<sup>47</sup> This allowed them to maintain funding from the Gulf, which the PLO subsequently lost.

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<sup>43</sup> Sayigh. 640.

<sup>44</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, March 4, 1990.

<sup>45</sup> Rashid I. Khalidi, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," *Current History* 90, no. 552 (1991): 20.

<sup>46</sup> "Editorial," *Al-Hadaf*, August 12, 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 651.

Now publicly siding with Iraq, the PLO began touting an international conspiracy against Iraq and the PLO—the U.S., it claimed, had conspired to create an Iraqi and PLO financial crisis by prompting its Arab allies to withhold aid, and the Iraqi invasion was therefore a justifiable pre-emptive strike against the “new crusaders” of American imperialism.<sup>48</sup> The stance was at least partially driven by (correct) beliefs that Kuwait was funding Hamas.<sup>49</sup> But more important was the belief, strongest in Fatah, that the Americans would not actually resort to war.<sup>50</sup> Going even further, the PFLP claimed Iraq had restored the military threat to Israel and was now the strategic backbone of the Palestinian resistance.<sup>51</sup> In retrospect, this is almost comically wrong, but U.S. power at that time was relatively untested; the last ground war they had fought outside of tiny South American dependencies was in Vietnam, which they lost. However, American military technology and organization was stronger than ever, and the embarrassingly quick Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War would become the first expression of American global hegemony, severely damaging PLO prestige and diplomatic influence among their Arab peers.

The Gulf Crisis saw Fatah misread the diplomatic context and the PFLP misread the military balance, and they were both preoccupied with the aspects of the crisis predicted by their organizational culture. Fatah supported Iraq in the erroneous belief that the Americans would push for a diplomatic solution they could use to their benefit, as well as to preserve Iraqi diplomatic and material support—after all, the Arab world had

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<sup>48</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, September 23, 1990; Muhammad Sulayman, *Filastin Al-Thawra*, September 2, 1990.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Mattar, “The PLO and the Gulf Crisis,” *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (1994): 41.

<sup>50</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> *Al-Hadaf*, September 9, 1990.

just spent the past decade supporting Iraq against Iran. Fatah followed the interorganizational information, just as the PFLP followed social information: Palestinians, broadly, seemed to support Iraq, and more importantly, Iraq's belligerent position towards Israel and the U.S. was in line with what the PFLP believed was the best strategy for pursuing the interests of Palestinian refugees. This view was abetted by the fact that an Iraqi-backed Palestinian faction had just launched an attack on Tel Aviv.<sup>52</sup>

Immediately after the Iraqi defeat, Fatah offered to hold bilateral negotiations with Israel, hoping that the damage to its prestige would disappear if they simply ignored it and again reflecting Fatah's persistent cultural preference for negotiation. Instead, the US and Israel pushed a peace plan for bilateral talks with Syria, Lebanon, and a Jordan-Palestinian delegation with representatives only from the West Bank and Gaza, excluding residents of Jerusalem or PLO affiliates. Critically for future negotiations, Israel was particularly insistent on a phased program: Palestinians could negotiate terms of autonomy for a period of five years with its final status decided thereafter. The retreat from the militant language in support of Iraq was swift; Arafat said in early 1991 that they needed "programs commensurate with our capabilities."<sup>53</sup> Fatah officials also condemned the Iraqi occupation, but far too late.<sup>54</sup> As Syria and Lebanon agreed to join the prospective Madrid Conference, the PLO accepted its lot and confirmed that a Palestinian delegation would attend as well, formed under the terms set by the U.S. and Israel. Even under poor terms, Fatah could not say no to the chance for a negotiated settlement.

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<sup>52</sup> Khalidi, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," 20.

<sup>53</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 643.

<sup>54</sup> Khalidi, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," 19.

The PFLP, recognizing that this functionally meant abandoning the right of return for 1948 refugees, pushed for “hardline tactics in the era of retreat,” but by this point, whatever influence the PFLP had was gone.<sup>55</sup> In accepting Fatah’s leadership of the PLO and the necessity of an international peace conference, the energy that undergirded the PFLP dissipated. The iterative process of their downfall was a social and financial feedback loop; as they lost support and energy, and walked away from Syria, they became increasingly reliant on the PLO for funding, which in turn continued the death spiral of their social constituency. What was left of their organization in Lebanon weakened as many members returned to private life or emigrated. Their belief that the Intifada could escalate into an insurgency was quickly contradicted by the clear exhaustion of Palestinians by 1990. Fatah’s diplomatic strategy was rooted in an awareness of this fact: if the Intifada could not last forever, they had to make a deal while it was still alive. The PFLP, already culturally disinclined to perceive shifts in international relations, lacked the acumen to see even the social information spelling their downfall: they did not have meaningful roots in the West Bank or Gaza and what remained of their networks among refugee communities were dissipating.

The PFLP persisted, nonetheless, in pursuing insurgency. Even as late as December 1991, the PFLP was claiming it was constructing a people’s army in Lebanon and asserted the next strategic move should be moving guerillas and weapons into the occupied territories; they were particularly incensed against those claiming the Intifada was non-violent.<sup>56</sup> A small group in Gaza, the remnants of their militant networks in the

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<sup>55</sup> *Al-Hadaf*, September 1, 1991.

<sup>56</sup> Fu’ad Abd-al-Karim, *Al-Hadaf*, December 22, 1991.

Occupied Territories, pushed the PFLP leadership to be more flexible towards the peace process to no avail. Their intransigence drove even these small contingents in Gaza to leave the organization.<sup>57</sup> The PFLP between 1989 and 1991 made various desperate attempts to secure independent relevancy, but socialist politics had lost their purchase with the collapse of the USSR, Palestinian refugees had given up on them, and they were wholly reliant on the PLO—and therefore, Fatah—for securing the necessary funding to continue existing. Between 1991 and 1993, the PFLP continued calls for a military struggle even as they backtracked their position on negotiations. Still a dynamic organization, cut off from their sources of information and facing uncertainty, the PFLP tried everything to recover. They fled so far from rejection that they landed eventually on meekly asserting in mid-1992 that negotiations with Israel should be based on UNSCR 242, a position they had spent the majority of their existence fighting against.<sup>58</sup> Their identity had for so long been associated with persistent armed struggle, any Palestinians supporting this new position were more likely to support Fatah, and thus the PFLP's political relevance dissipated almost completely.

### *Hamas' Shift to Violence*

Meanwhile, Hamas before 1991 was still figuring out its strategic position, acting and measuring popular response to iteratively inform strategy. Sheikh Yassin acted as its central spokesman, approving negotiations with Israel, albeit under stringent and near-impossible to obtain conditions, and accepting the desirability of a Palestinian state in the

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<sup>57</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 649.

<sup>58</sup> *Al-Hadaf*, June 28, 1992.

occupied territories existing alongside Israel without accepting the necessity of recognizing Israel.<sup>59</sup> The younger generation of Hamas, however, took more radical stances. In 1989, Hamas cells started attacking IDF soldiers, most notably kidnapping and killing their first IDF soldier in February and another in May.<sup>60</sup> They also began using terrorism in a small handful of incidents beginning in 1990 with the stabbing of several Israeli workers in an aluminum plant.<sup>61</sup> Hamas' transition towards violence reflected their long-held stance that they were the inheritors of the tradition of armed struggle as Hamas itself was founded out of Sheikh Yassin's desire to start an insurgency on an Islamist basis, but they were motivated in the near-term by perceived opposition to Fatah's negotiation strategy and broader exhaustion with civil resistance. The Intifada had asked much of Palestinians, and for Hamas, starting an insurgency was in part a way to relieve that burden while continuing their struggle.<sup>62</sup> These attacks were infrequent in 1989 and 1990, but were soon to escalate. Their success in damaging the far more advanced Israeli military forces and attacking civilians under their protection was strong tactical information supporting violence: since the political ends of violence were understood to be distant and the strategic outlook long-term, the lack of immediate political gains did not discourage continued insurgency and terrorism as much as tactical success encouraged it.

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<sup>59</sup> "Interview with Sheikh Ahmad Yassin," *Al-Hayat*, September 18, 1989.

<sup>60</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 207.

<sup>61</sup> Special to The New York Times, "3 Israelis Are Slain, Setting Off Riots," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1990, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/15/world/3-israelis-are-slain-setting-off-riots.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.; Author interview with Imam and Islamist activist, 2023.

Hamas felt its violence was widely supported and acted as such.<sup>63</sup> In 1990, when the PNC invited them to join the PLO, Hamas asked for 40% of the seats in the PNC to reflect their popularity in the occupied territories and demanded an abrogation of the 1988 program approving negotiations with Israel, which the PLO could obviously not accept. Hamas continued its attempts to challenge Fatah's legitimacy, calling for PNC general elections in 1991 and then publishing a statement condemning PLO participation in the Madrid conference.<sup>64</sup> The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, intended to be a multilateral and bilateral set of talks between Israel and its neighbors, failed to secure any kind of meaningful agreement. The Palestinians were only allowed to join in a joint delegation with the Jordanians, a concession they had rejected as ludicrous only four years earlier. The talks elicited resistance from Hamas and the PFLP, both of whom joined a counter-conference to the 1991 PNC session hosted in Tehran, creating a tenuous alliance of factions opposed to Fatah called the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF).

It was only after the PLO decision to send the delegation to Madrid that Hamas began actively and strategically using violence against Israel. Hamas attacks on IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians became frequent, though they were mostly random attacks claimed or permitted only after the fact.<sup>65</sup> This served two roles: differentiating Hamas' identity and strategy from Fatah and capturing the energy and anger of increasingly repressed Palestinians, as Fatah had once done in its organizational youth. In July and August 1991, street fights with knives and clubs erupted between Fatah and Hamas followers even as their respective leaderships made reconciliation agreements; the

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<sup>63</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> *Al-Hayat*, October 11, 1991.

<sup>65</sup> Wendy Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge: Hamas's Response to Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 21.

fighting continued sporadically until at least early 1992. Hamas anchored culture saw them follow social information, and they believed at the time that Palestinians would not support the concessions made at Madrid and that armed struggle would galvanize the ongoing fury at Israeli forces for attacking and killing Palestinian protestors.

After an initial weakness in 1988 and 1989, 1990 and 1991 were marked by strong inter-organizational information and weakening social information. As the Intifada wound down, the preferences of Palestinians were not clear. Refugees certainly still wanted armed struggle as Israel's defeat was still their only way home, but by now the original refugees of 1948 were forty years older. This meant older refugees had likely died, the younger were now old, and the child refugees were now young people who had grown up amidst four decades of war. Amidst these conditions, and with the PLO seemingly leaving them behind, many simply walked away from politics, which hit the PFLP especially hard. The uncertainty pushed Hamas to continue violence—as predicted, static culture produced strategic inertia under uncertainty.

The situation in the occupied territories was not much better, as clear divides in strategic beliefs arose. As the Intifada faltered, no clear alternative to civil resistance emerged, at least none with a consensus. Most of the community activists and communists believed in the Intifada as a non-violent phenomenon and supported continued civil resistance. Meanwhile, Islamist activists and Hamas members began pushing violence to capture the frustration of the Intifada's failure to make change, but this was far from a popular mood; Hamas was still very much a minority movement in 1991.<sup>66</sup> Though uncertainty reigned, and this pushed continuing existing strategy for

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<sup>66</sup> Sara Roy, "The Political Economy of Despair: Changing Political and Economic Realities in the Gaza Strip," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 3 (April 1, 1991): 64-65.

Hamas, Hamas was also responding to a real increase in support for violence. Sara Roy recounts an instance in which Gazans in the Bureij refugee camp were unusually supportive of a mob attack on an Israeli soldier who had accidentally hit two kids with his car, even rebuffing U.N. staff trying to deescalate the situation as they had in the past without issue.<sup>67</sup> Summing up the mood in Gaza in 1990 this represented, she writes,

The fear of expulsion and the internalized sense of defeat and frustration which have entered popular discourse have resulted in a fundamental and qualitative change in the psychology of the people inside the Gaza Strip. Not surprisingly, therefore, attitudes toward the use of violence have also changed. Increasingly, violence is perceived as the only option available to Palestinians; as such, violence becomes acceptable and the consequences of using it are willingly incurred.<sup>68</sup>

This was an isolated incident, but it was prescient. With nonetheless limited social information, Hamas sought to “...stake a claim to a share of the PLO’s symbolic resources”<sup>69</sup> with a return to violence; thanks primarily to Fatah and the PFLP, armed struggle had become a pillar of Palestinian revolutionary identity. Symbolically, it was easy for Hamas to paint a picture of the secular organizations dropping the gun and Hamas picking it up. Uncertainty pushed Hamas to continue using violence, but what social information was ascertainable at the time seemed to trend towards violence as well.

Interorganizational information was strong during this period as Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas had to deface the clear U.S. unipolarity. Fatah and the PFLP went all-in on Iraq while Hamas did its best to stay neutral. Such were their positions internationally; Fatah had lost support from the Gulf sheikhdoms and Egypt and only had Iraq left as an

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<sup>67</sup> Roy. 68.

<sup>68</sup> Roy. 67.

<sup>69</sup> Hani Awad, “Understanding Hamas: Remarks on Three Different and Interrelated Theoretical Approaches,” *AlMuntaqa* 4, no. 2 (2021): 52.

international patron, while Hamas relied on the Gulf sheikhdoms for money and guns.<sup>70</sup> The impending collapse of the USSR had left the PFLP especially weak, so it was no wonder they were Iraq's most stringent supporters in the PLO. Social information also abetted the pro-Iraq stance. A poll, albeit a poorly conducted one, found in August 1990 strong majorities (~84%) in support of Saddam and Arafat's political support for him, and a weak majority (58%) in support of the invasion of Kuwait. This expresses the complicated position Palestinians took: support for the invasion was secondary to supporting Hussein as a force combatting Israel in the international realm. More fundamentally, Palestinians were incensed at such a strong and unified international reaction led by the U.S. to oppose an occupation while simultaneously the U.S. was actively supporting the Israeli occupation and had permitted the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which killed roughly 1,900% more people.<sup>71</sup>

It is unsurprising, given the confluence of social and interorganizational information, that Fatah and the PFLP supported Iraq. Hamas' middle-of-the-road approach is more surprising, given they are anchored in a population so supportive of Iraq. Hamas, in the end, appears canny; they backtracked their initial calls for withdrawal and thereafter supported Iraq enough such that they did not suffer a meaningful decline in support and managed to maintain their Gulf funding at the same time.<sup>72</sup> If anything, their initial position informed by interorganizational information was quickly disciplined by social information.

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<sup>70</sup> Mattar, "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis." 41.

<sup>71</sup> Mattar. 39.

<sup>72</sup> Roger Heacock, "From the Mediterranean to the Gulf and Back Again: The Palestinian Intifada and the Gulf War," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 1/2 (1991): 68, 76.

The Gulf Crisis put the Intifada on hold, in part because it had already stalled. Whatever leverage the Intifada had afforded the PLO, the Gulf crisis almost certainly dissipated. Fatah was now negotiating from a point of weakness. Interorganizational information was still strong, and still supported negotiation for Fatah—the Madrid Conference had failed, but there were subsequent planned bilateral negotiations among its participants set for 1992 that held promise. There were also no other viable strategies, as civil resistance was floundering without support; plus, without a physical base from which to launch attacks and any military networks being quickly uprooted by the IDF, a return to violence was not a feasible strategic option, the PFLP's unrealistic assertions aside. But Hamas' roots in the occupied territories meant it had some security, though severely limited, thanks to its deep pool of recruits, leaders, and network of Islamic institutions. Its strategy was less about the military conditions as Hamas continued to pursue violence in accordance with the belief, informed by its static culture, that persistence under uncertainty would pay off in the long term. Organizational depth and the pervasiveness of Islamic institutions allowed Hamas to do what the PFLP could not, but their organizational culture pushed them to do what Fatah would not.

### **The Oslo Accords, 1992 – 1994**

#### *Negotiating from Weakness*

Fatah's weakness in the early 1990s was multifaceted. They had suffered a severe hit to their prestige and negotiating posture with their support for Iraq in the Gulf crisis, but this was only one of many tribulations. Attempts to rebuild forces in a now post-war Lebanon were frustrated by stiff resistance from rejectionist groups, local Palestinian

refugees, the Lebanese Army, Hezbollah, and even rebellious Fatah commanders opposed to the peace process.<sup>73</sup> Lebanese Palestinians, seeing the peace process as a way to leave them behind in favor of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, were fighting Fatah every step on the path towards a negotiated settlement, believing it would leave them in the homelessness, unemployment, internecine violence, and universal animosity persistent inside of Lebanon.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, Arafat was being further isolated from his sources of information. While Arafat had always relied on a dense network of intelligence networks to gather information, the assassination of Salah Khalaf in 1990 alongside other Fatah security personnel made this increasingly difficult. At the same time, many Palestinians in the lower rungs of Fatah's intelligence and security wings were asked to transfer to southern Libyan training camps, and instead sought political asylum in Western and Northern Europe.<sup>75</sup> Fatah, having survived so long in large part thanks to its international intelligence apparatus and canny use of military means as a policy instrument, now lacked both an intelligence apparatus and a military of meaningful strength. Fatah was pursuing negotiation at an increasingly high cost, driven by the firm belief among its leadership that this was the last best chance for a peace deal. Their dynamic culture not only biased them towards strategic change under uncertainty, but also short-term strategic thinking.

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<sup>73</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 653-654.

<sup>74</sup> Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinians in Lebanon: Harsh Present, Uncertain Future," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 1 (1995): 51.

<sup>75</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 654.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

There was resistance to the peace talks inside the occupied territories in addition to conflict in Lebanon. When participation in the Madrid Conference was announced, Hamas flexed its political muscles by shutting down Gaza for three days with a series of successful strikes, though undercut by Fatah operatives forcing shops to reopen.<sup>76</sup> This conflict, and the subsequent street conflicts between Fatah and Hamas supporters, culminating in violent clashes in July 1992, marked the end of a unified Intifada.<sup>77</sup> It also humbled Hamas; though they'd successfully called for strikes in open defiance of Fatah, street conflicts had clearly shown Fatah's superiority in numbers. Hamas leader Aziz Rantisi affirmed this result, saying in July 1992, "I am certain that the Islamic Movement is not interested in having any conflicts with Fatah. I'll go even further ... the Islamic Movement will lose in any confrontation."<sup>78</sup> This was the end of Hamas' strategy of civil resistance—Fatah's victory in the streets and the waning willingness of Palestinians to endure personal sacrifice for their cause convinced Hamas that civil resistance was not sustainable. They recognized the clear social information: Palestinians were too economically strained to continue to bear the burden of resistance.<sup>79</sup>

They had lost the streets, so to speak, so Hamas leadership moved quickly to reassert itself and regain losses in public opinion. Their anchored culture pushed them towards recapturing popularity, even as their static culture pushed a long-term strategic view. Slowly building the capacity for long-term insurgency became the formal Hamas

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<sup>76</sup> Graham Usher, "What Kind of Nation?: The Rise of Hamas in the Occupied Territories," in *Dispatches From Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process*, Middle East Issues (Pluto Press, 1999), 21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fsbd1.7>.

<sup>77</sup> Graham Usher, "What Kind of Nation?: The Rise of Hamas in the Occupied Territories," in *Dispatches From Palestine, The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process* (Pluto Press, 1999), 21.

<sup>78</sup> Usher. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Alin, "Dynamics of the Palestinian Uprising," 491.

plan. Having formally founded an armed wing in the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades (IQB) in late 1991, Hamas was able to coalesce more organized and capable violence against the Israelis by December 1992, in contrast to the sporadic and sparse violence that had characterized Hamas' tactics in previous years. This change in tactics both represented increased capabilities and an attempt to regain credibility by co-opting Fatah's revolutionary credentials they had gained from armed struggle. In three attacks over the course of a week, the IQB killed six Israeli soldiers. While Hamas' first attack on IDF soldiers targeted a hitchhiking off-duty lieutenant, these attacks were coordinated assaults and ambushes of active-duty police and soldiers.<sup>80</sup>

Israel's response was to exile hundreds of Islamist leaders to Lebanon, which backfired in several distinct ways. First, public outrage at the move proved popular support for Hamas and international condemnation of Israel. The PLO was even forced to abrogate negotiations for a few months in recognition of this popular—and more importantly for Fatah, international—mood.<sup>81</sup> Second, Hamas leadership were able to gather in their exile and convene on strategy. These were not the old guard of the Muslim Brotherhood but a new generation of middle-class professionals and businessmen. They were not necessarily more moderate politically, but they were more media savvy and able to present legitimacy to the outside world in ways the old leadership could not. Perhaps most importantly, they made contact with Hezbollah and received training, advice, and

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<sup>80</sup> David Hoffman, "KIDNAPPED ISRAELI GUARD FOUND SLAIN," *Washington Post*, December 16, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/12/16/kidnapped-israeli-guard-found-slain/ad60fbbc-3a5c-4d93-b6c0-9afbe7af1c96/>.

<sup>81</sup> Clyde Haberman, "Israel Expels 400 From Occupied Lands; Lebanese Deploy to Bar Entry of Palestinians," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1992, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/18/world/israel-expels-400-occupied-lands-lebanese-deploy-bar-entry-palestinians.html>.

secondhand operational experience in the use of car-bombs, tunnel construction, and suicide bombs: tactics that would later come to define Hamas' strategy.<sup>82</sup> Lastly, the IQB did not actually suffer any damage to its capabilities, and their attacks continued through 1993, including two bombings in April and October 1993.<sup>83</sup> The exiled Islamists were allowed to return in December 1993 anyway. All in all, it added up to a nice year-long holiday in Lebanon for Hamas leadership to plan their next move, though the landscape in the West Bank and Gaza was radically different when they returned.

### *The Oslo Shock*

In late 1991 Arafat still believed the U.S. was the party to be convinced, though other Fatah leaders—especially Mahmoud Abbas and Ahmad Qurei—believed bilateral negotiations with Israel were just as important, if not more so.<sup>84</sup> Their successful pursuits led to the opening of a back channel in Oslo with Norwegian mediation. Arafat, Abbas, and Qurei, as well as a small handful of other negotiators, believed the negotiations had to be secret to prevent agitation from the outside against them.<sup>85</sup> A completed peace deal was popular, but a peace process was contentious.<sup>86</sup> Fatah's conception of popular support was limited to the Occupied Territories—their floating culture allowed them to make compromises that the PFLP, anchored in the refugee community, constitutively could not. Meanwhile, the Palestinian delegation sent to the Madrid Conference was

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<sup>82</sup> Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*. 66.

<sup>83</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 21.

<sup>84</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 657.

<sup>86</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

sidelined and the negotiations intentionally stalled in favor of the secret Oslo negotiations.

The 1993 success of the first Oslo Accords was due to two breakthroughs between the Palestinians and Israelis. First was the Israeli acceptance of PLO involvement at all, which springs from two sources, as candidly told by one of the primary negotiators in the Oslo negotiations in interviews: the PLO's weakness at the time of negotiations and the increasing strength of Hamas in the occupied territories.<sup>87</sup> The Israelis felt that they could get the best deal possible out of a weak PLO fighting a rising competitor, who the Israelis also feared would soon become the dominant Palestinian political organization. As documents later revealed, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres noted to one of his subordinates, "We don't want the PLO to lose. We don't love them, but in light of the alternative we became romantic."<sup>88</sup> The second breakthrough was the phased approach, which apparently was so enticing to the Israeli negotiators that it greatly accelerated the pace of negotiations and Israeli acceptance of previously rejected concessions.<sup>89</sup> The first Oslo Accords created a self-governing authority in Gaza and the West Bank city of Jericho to be administered by the PLO, followed by elections and an extension of authority to other West Bank cities. Negotiations to decide the nature and powers of this authority were to be concluded within the next 5 years, and two years thereafter a final status negotiation. The final status negotiation phase was of particular interest to Israeli negotiators, as it put off all the most important questions for future negotiations and future negotiators. The final status issues,

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<sup>87</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Ofer Aderet, "What I Fear Is a Palestinian State. Yitzhak Rabin Will Not Accept It," *Haaretz*, February 14, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with Fatah official C, 2023.

now infamous, were Jerusalem, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, refugees' right of return, and the nature and capabilities of a prospective Palestinian military.

The publication of the Oslo Accords in 1993 was controversial. Prominent PLO executive committee members resigned in protest, not at the concept of a peace settlement, but at the terms of the Oslo Accords which they saw as unacceptable.<sup>90</sup> Even many of the most pro-negotiation members of Fatah were alarmed. But Arafat justified the negotiations as practical. One senior Fatah official recounted the conversation he had with Arafat after learning the terms of the Oslo Accords:

*Fatah official:* How can we accept these terms with so many problems?

*Arafat:* How many problems did you find?

*Fatah official:* I don't know, maybe 20.

*Arafat:* I found at least 50! But this is the only way we can return our forces to Palestine. This is but a step towards liberation.<sup>91</sup>

It is impossible to know how sincerely Arafat meant this; as easily as it could have been true he intended to continue the armed struggle, it just as easily could have been true he was attempting to co-opt support for the deal from reticent executive committee members. After all, the PLO executive committee only passed the first Oslo Accord with nine votes out of a total eighteen; had there not been abstentions and resignations, it may not have passed.<sup>92</sup> Israeli negotiators attitudes towards Arafat do reflect a suspicion this was the case, as Shimon Peres was later revealed to have said to his deputy, "We are dealing with a fox. ... I'm starting to be concerned about whether the man is serious. I don't want to be his victim."<sup>93</sup> Later leaks would also confirm the fears of refugees:

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<sup>90</sup> Shafiq Al-Hout, *My Life in the PLO: The Inside Story of the Palestinian Struggle*, ed. Jean Said Makdisi, trans. Hader Al-Hout (Pluto Press, 2011). 301.

<sup>91</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*. 658.

<sup>93</sup> Aderet, "What I Fear Is a Palestinian State. Yitzhak Rabin Will Not Accept It."

Ahmad Qurei apparently affirmed to Israeli negotiators that the right of return could be easily abrogated in the event of a permanent settlement.<sup>94</sup> Only an organization with Fatah's culture could have made this deal: only a floating organization could pivot from its origins in the refugee community to abandoning their interests, and only a dynamic organization would have the short-term strategic outlook to accept a deal that did not settle any of the most contentious issues.

The first Oslo Accord was a bad deal for the Palestinians by almost any measure. It was worse than many previously available deals, in no small part because of its phased nature. Though Fatah interviewees asserted this was not the case, that the phased approach was so central to Israeli acceptance and their subsequent non-fulfilment of the agreement suggests the phased approach was a way to quiet the occupied territories and achieve the local interlocutors they had tried to obtain previously in schemes such as the village leagues.<sup>95</sup> This view—that the Oslo Accords represented an Israeli attempt to create a local interlocutor they could manage—was oft-repeated to me independently and unprompted by non-Fatah interviewees.<sup>96</sup> It was also espoused by a number of academic observers of the conflict at the time Oslo was signed, most notably Edward Said and Noam Chomsky.<sup>97</sup> The agreement was also signed under enormous pressure, as Israel had

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<sup>94</sup> Aderet.

<sup>95</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Author interview with Palestinian union activist, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.;

Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with DFPLP-affiliated activist, 2023.; Author interview with PFLP-affiliated activist, 2023.; Author interview with formerly Fatah-affiliated activist and refugee, 2023.; Author interview with formerly PFLP-affiliated activist and refugee, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle, Updated Edition: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 1999); Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (Vintage, 2001), <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/159792/the-end-of-the-peace-process-by-edward-w-said/>.

re-implemented extreme measures of repression against the West Bank and particularly Gaza, making it clear to negotiators that they were being held hostage until the PLO accepted the terms presented.<sup>98</sup>

The Oslo Accords marked the end of the Intifada, but its symbolic importance remained. The First Intifada's historiography quickly became a competition for claims to legitimacy, and the differences between Fatah and Hamas in their accounts of the history is telling regarding their cultural differences vis-à-vis embeddedness. Hamas has long sought to frame its participation in the First Intifada as simultaneously cooperative and foundational while downplaying its nonviolence. In a commemorative statement on the First Intifada, Hamas went so far as to include statements affirming the necessary continuation of armed struggle, though most heavily focused on the contribution of martyrs and Palestinians who lost their homes.<sup>99</sup> Hamas' anchored culture drives them to emphasize the collective action and popular mobilization aspect of struggle, even if they use it as instrumental political support for their preferred strategy.

Fatah's history of the First Intifada is more telling since it hardly can be said to exist at all. In asking Fatah interviewees to recall a general chronology of the Palestinian struggle, all three senior Fatah leaders essentially skipped over 1988 – 1991, moving from their exile to Tunis and the internal conflict with rejectionists straight to the Oslo negotiations.<sup>100</sup> In Ramallah, I spent a significant amount of time reading in the Yasser

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<sup>98</sup> Graham Usher, "Why Gaza Says Yes, Mostly," in *Dispatches From Palestine*, The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process (Pluto Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>99</sup> Hamas, "Statement on anniversary of Palestinian First Intifada," Hamas, December 8, 2020, <https://hamas.ps/en/post/3123/Statement-on-anniversary-of-Palestinian-First-Intifada.>; Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023. Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023. Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

Arafat Museum, built on the site of his besieged compound in 2016. It features long hallways depicting a chronological timeline of the Palestinian struggle, beginning with antiquity, and ending with Yasser Arafat's death in 2006.<sup>101</sup> But missing from the timeline was any mention whatsoever of the First Intifada. One display discusses the assassination of al-Wazir in 1988, and the next features the announcement of the Oslo Accords, as if these were the only two events of note between 1988 and 1993. It's impossible to know why it was excluded, but non-Fatah interviewees suggested two theories. First, that Fatah did not want to include mentions of a strategy of civil resistance now that it was governing, for fear of fondly remembering a strategy that created independent sources of power that may be a political threat.<sup>102</sup> Second, that the First Intifada was a moment of unity and collective work Fatah would prefer was forgotten in the interest of preserving their singular political dominion and the unquestionable primacy of negotiation. This was linked to the idea that they wanted to frame the Oslo Accords as a specifically and purely Fatah accomplishment, requiring they deny the pressure role played by civil resistance in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>103</sup> The political affiliations of these interviewees suggest this is a predominantly left-wing view. Fatah interviewees did not acknowledge the Museum's omission, even when asked about it directly.<sup>104</sup> Nonetheless, Fatah's floating culture<sup>104</sup> makes them more likely to focus on

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<sup>101</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Museum Explores Arafat's Legacy but Leaves Unanswered Questions," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2016, sec. World.

<sup>102</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Author interview with Palestinian union activist, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

<sup>104</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023. Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023. Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

organizational action and success while downplaying the role of popular mobilization and collective action.

Despite the complexity of popular support for the Oslo Accords, the idea that ‘peace negotiations are contentious, but a completed peace agreement is popular’ turned out to be true. In interviews, interviewees noted consistently that Hamas and Fatah differed with regards to polls: Hamas followed them obsessively, while Fatah leaders, especially Arafat, preferred to rely on intelligence networks and political relations with other factions to gather information about the popular mood.<sup>105</sup> Polling—which from 1993 on would become a constant source of social information for Palestinian organizations—showed solid support for the Oslo Accords at 65%, with only 28% saying they were opposed. The specifics of the deal, however, were far less popular than the deal itself. For example, 60% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza opposed the postponement of negotiations on Jerusalem, refugees, and settlements.<sup>106</sup> Those opposed to the deal were also very opposed, and mostly located in Gaza: when asked what strategy the opposition should follow to express their views, 86% of West Bankers said democratic dialogue and only 6% said violence. In Gaza, however, 28% supported violence.

Support for the deal should not be overstated, however. Polling and reporting from the time suggest not a people rejoiced at peace, but a beleaguered people accepting whatever kind of relief they can get. An American journalist’s interview with a 60-year-

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<sup>105</sup> Author interview with Palestinian union activist, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.

<sup>106</sup> Policy Analysis Unit, “The Palestinian-Israeli Agreement: ‘Gaza-Jericho First,’” Public Opinion Poll #1 (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, September 11, 1993).

old Gazan fisherman—who had lived there through British, Egyptian, Israeli, and now Palestinian rule—summarizes the mood as represented in a series of other interviews and anecdotes:

I feel like a man who has lost a million dollars and been given ten. But, you see, I lost the million dollars a long time ago. So I will keep the ten. We cannot go on the way we are. I accept, I accept, I accept. After so much bloodshed, I accept. But, please, don't ask me how I feel.<sup>107</sup>

This weak but pervasive support for the deal put Hamas in a dilemma. Internal Hamas documents show its leaders were pessimistic about their prospects and acutely aware of their weakness in the face of Oslo's broad popularity, resulting in an internal call for preserving unity among Palestinian factions as they worked to unite Islamist and secular opposition to the negotiations.<sup>108</sup> Writing from prison two months after the Oslo Accords were signed, Sheikh Yassin published an open letter expressing two key public moderations from previous Hamas positions: first, that if Israel withdrew from the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas would agree to a long-term ceasefire or "*hudna*"<sup>109</sup> of 10-20 years, and second, that Hamas should participate in Palestinian legislative elections.<sup>110</sup>

Nonetheless, in the short term, Yassin was clearly calling for moderation, cooperation with the new PA, and limited armed struggle. At the same time, however, the broader Hamas leadership was concerned with the sustainability of this strategy: the Intifada and Hamas' proselytization efforts created a generation of young people who had only known Fatah and the PLO as moderate negotiators, whose first initiation into

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<sup>107</sup> Usher, "Why Gaza Says Yes, Mostly." 17.

<sup>108</sup> Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*. 67.

<sup>109</sup> *Hudna* is a concept from Islam that describes a tactical ceasefire between Muhammad's nascent Muslim's and the Quraysh tribe controlling Mecca; the ceasefire ended when Muhammad had spread Islam and strengthened his forces such that he returned to capture Mecca in a bloodless conquest.

<sup>110</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 23.

political life was the Intifada, and who believed in the necessity of armed struggle.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, leaders and rank-and-file alike saw violent resistance as their key source of legitimacy and thereby a shield from total elimination by the PA. Hamas' static and anchored culture were at odds as social information pushed their moderation away from violence they believed was essential to their cause. Uncertainty about the future made the static Hamas feel its safest route was perpetuating insurgency and terrorism as strategies. It was not so easy for Hamas to change strategies with such immediacy, though events in early 1994 would make moderation seem moot.

If polling did not raise alarms for Fatah, the 1994 Birzeit University elections did. Birzeit had been shut down during the First Intifada, beginning a phased reopening in 1992. The 1994 elections, held in November 1993, were the second return of student elections since then—the 1993 elections saw Fatah handily win without much contest—and the stakes were high after the announcement of the Oslo Accords. There were three reasons for this. First, students made the elections about strategy and factions, inseparable concepts at the time. The contest was between supporters of the Oslo Accords and supporters of armed struggle.<sup>112</sup> Second, Birzeit University was a reasonably good cross-section of the occupied territories, representing similar proportions of social class and geographical background, as well as being the biggest university in occupied Palestine, so all of the political factions saw it as an important institution for measuring support.<sup>113</sup> Third, at the time this was the only democratic institution around. Fatah disbelieved polls

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<sup>111</sup> Kristianasen. 22.

<sup>112</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

<sup>113</sup> Khalid Farraj, "The First Intifada (Part II): The Road to Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 49, no. 1 (193) (2019): 95-96.

as readily as Hamas believed them, but both agreed: the 1994 Birzeit University elections represented the popular mood. The resources invested in the elections make this much clear, especially the presence on campus of high-level leaders of Fatah, Hamas, and the PFLP.<sup>114</sup>

The Birzeit elections settled into two blocs, the pro-Oslo Fatah-backed bloc of “Jerusalem and Statehood” against the anti-Oslo PFLP and Hamas joint bloc of “Jerusalem First”, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the “Jericho and Gaza First” initial phase of Oslo. The actual politics focused on strategy to the exclusion of social issues as well as student issues. Speeches centered on which group had the most martyrs; one notable incident saw a Hamas student speaker demand a Fatah official in the crowd take off his military fatigues, worn as a reminder of Fatah’s past militancy, since Fatah’s soldiers were “surrendering”.<sup>115</sup> Participation and engagement among the student body was nearly universal; a student at the time said about the election, “...the extent of [student] engagement was unprecedented in the annals of the student movement.”<sup>116</sup>

The Jerusalem First bloc won the election less than one hundred votes in an election with roughly 3,000 voters. Hamas saw this victory as an affirmation of support for their strategies. The victorious Hamas-linked Student Council President said, “These results demonstrate the Palestinian people's rejection of the deal...The agreement was wrong in principle, and every day it is being shown to be wrong in practice.”<sup>117</sup> A close election can be explained in any way an observer would like, however, and just as Hamas

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<sup>114</sup> Farraj. 96.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Farraj. 96.

<sup>116</sup> Farraj. 97.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Parks, “Foes of PLO-Israel Deal Win West Bank Student Election,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1993, sec. World & Nation, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-11-25-mn-60694-story.html>.

saw it as a popular mandate, Fatah saw it as a more limited message. The Fatah failed candidate for Student Council President remarked that it should not be treated as a broad referendum, since, “Birzeit feels everything more acutely and even in advance of the rest of our people, and these results are more a warning to the PLO and to the Israelis that results are needed to bring this agreement to life”.<sup>118</sup> But internally there was at least some recognition that the election was a bad omen for Fatah; it was reported at the time that Arafat personally called Fatah student leaders and demanded they overturn the results of the elections even if it caused rioting.<sup>119</sup>

The Birzeit elections were a crucial piece of social information going into 1994. Hamas took it as a strong mandate for armed resistance, shown in its increased use of violence in the year after the elections—and, indeed, in the weeks after. Fatah, meanwhile, clearly understood that implementing the Oslo Accords was crucial to their political survival even as they denied that opposition to the deal was really opposition to the actual components of the deal. Subsequent polls, which Fatah seemed to not pay much heed, would disprove this stance: polled support for the deal was always much higher than support for any of its components.<sup>120</sup> Arafat’s rage at the election results seemed to confirm at least a momentary recognition inside Fatah’s leadership that the elections were a meaningful win for opponents of Oslo. Birzeit University elections—which Hamas would mostly win—continued to be signifiers of broader politics in Palestine throughout the 1990s, even as legislative elections began.

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<sup>118</sup> Parks.

<sup>119</sup> Parks.

<sup>120</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Palestinian Elections and the Hebron Massacre,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, March 20, 1994).

Fatah and the PLO, meanwhile, had begun implementing the Oslo Accords. This implementation was rocky, contentious, and increasingly unpopular as it was slow-rolled by the Israelis. But with Oslo, Fatah had regained and even expanded international funding meant to underwrite Palestinian autonomy, which Fatah took as assurance that the Oslo Accords were supported across the West and parts of the Arab world.<sup>121</sup> But the longer these economic boons and the broader political promises of Oslo were delayed, the more Fatah was sapped of legitimacy and popular support—Fatah’s organizational culture biased them towards seeing international support as a mandate even while popular support dissipated beneath them. This became the crux of Hamas’ military strategy after Oslo: rather than destroy the Oslo institutions, Hamas would delay their implementation, cause political problems for Fatah’s newly institutionalized relationship with Israel, and then take the popular institutions for themselves in a legitimate political process.<sup>122</sup> The truth of this analysis showed in Oslo’s rapidly declining popularity. The 65% support when the deal was signed in September disappeared by December, when only 41% of Palestinians said they supported the deal.<sup>123</sup>

Despite Yassin’s call for moderation of the armed struggle, attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets continued. The December 1993 assassination of Colonel Mintz, who led the IDF’s undercover units in Gaza, resulted in more support for Hamas; between December 12 and January 16 polls, Hamas saw a small but significant 3-point

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<sup>121</sup> Rex Brynen, “International Aid to the West Bank and Gaza: A Primer,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 2 (1996): 46–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538183>.

<sup>122</sup> Usher, “What Kind of Nation?” 23.; Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.; Author interview with Imam and Islamist activist, 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Palestinian Elections and the Declaration of Principles,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, December 12, 1993).

bump.<sup>124</sup> But more important was the reaction of the Israelis, who saw in Hamas now a capable underground network that neither Fatah nor the PFLP had ever come close to creating. IDF sources were quoted as saying approximately that Fatah, “had achieved nothing remotely resembling it during the 26 years [sic] of its existence.”<sup>125</sup> The APF also polled with significant support: 47% of Palestinians expressed support for their efforts.<sup>126</sup> Hamas’s anchored culture meant they were keenly tapped into this social information, but their static culture meant they were more concerned with the trend than the absolute popular support—and clearly their position was trending towards popularity, encouraging a continuation of violent strategy.

Fatah could not respond, but also had to respond. The Oslo Accords meant Fatah needed to maintain a good standing with Israel, but prospective democratic institutions required a continuous attentiveness to the population of the occupied territories. Not condemning Hamas’ attack would danger their relationship with Israel, but publicly disavowing the attack would invite ire from other Palestinians.<sup>127</sup> Hamas was using violence—at this time against Israeli military targets—to make the uncomfortable situation more so for Fatah while expanding its own popular base. Fatah was facing democratic accountability for the first time, which they were culturally unequipped to manage. Despite their status as the largest faction, they did not have a clear conception of the popular mood.

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<sup>124</sup> Survey Research Unit; Survey Research Unit, “Palestinian Political Attitudes Towards Elections and Other Issues of Concern,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, January 16, 1994).

<sup>125</sup> Israel Shahak, “Hamas and Arafat: The Balance of Power,” *Middle East International*, February 4, 1994.

<sup>126</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Palestinian Elections and the Declaration of Principles.”

<sup>127</sup> Usher, “What Kind of Nation?” 23.

The situation became markedly more uncomfortable for Fatah in February 1994 when an American-born settler and ultranationalist named Baruch Goldstein attacked Palestinians praying in a Hebron mosque while wearing an Israeli military uniform. The divide in response was stark. Fatah asserted Goldstein represented a fanatic trend in the settlers that Israel had to rein in while also permitting international protections for Palestinians.<sup>128</sup> Hamas, on the other hand, distributed a pamphlet promising violent revenge on the settlers. They made good on this promise in five unprecedented suicide bombings against Israeli civilian targets in areas under Israeli control throughout 1994, including an attack on Tel Aviv in October that was particularly troubling for the Israelis—Tel Aviv was a hard target, and casualties were very high relative to other attacks, with 22 dead and numerous more injured. This set of attacks represented a more organized and capable Hamas, albeit still decentralized, that could embark on campaigns rather than its previous sporadic patterns of opportunistic and often random attacks.<sup>129</sup>

But there was also a clear divide between a leadership that was observing the popular mood and pushing strategic moderation and a rank-and-file committed to using violence. A Hamas-Fatah agreement in April 1994 to give collaborators amnesty was followed by IQB fighters killing two collaborators in June and July. This was especially gratuitous considering an interview published with Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzuq in April 1994, in which he proclaimed Hamas would cooperate with any Palestinian-led institutions and reaffirmed his support for a hudna if Israel withdrew from the occupied territories.<sup>130</sup> Again, Hamas' static culture meant that the organization's membership

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<sup>128</sup> David Hoffman, "HEBRON MASSACRE TRIGGERS DAY OF BLOODSHED," *Washington Post*, February 26, 1994.

<sup>129</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 23.

<sup>130</sup> Kristianasen. 23.

were committed to the existing strategy of insurgency and terrorism—which satisfied rising emotional demands for revenge—while their anchored culture attuned them to the fact that Palestinians broadly wanted peace, despite public opinion trending towards opposing the Oslo Accords.

Hamas' attacks proved to be relatively popular amongst Palestinians; a November 1994 poll pegged support for armed attacks inside Israel at 52%; isolating Gaza finds even higher support at 58%.<sup>131</sup> Hamas was also probably observing a trend in the polls that spoke to a larger problem with the Oslo Accords: support for the deal and its institutions remained high, but when attached to any of the components of the deal, particularly the final status issues, support for the deal plummeted. Polled in March 1994, a slight majority (56%) of Palestinians said they supported continuing negotiations if Palestinians were given international protection. But in the same poll, asked the same question but with the added context of settlement negotiations being pushed to 1996, only 8% of Palestinians supported continuing the negotiations without Israel withdrawing settlers from Hebron.<sup>132</sup> 55% of Palestinians opposed continuing negotiations regardless of whether settlers were withdrawn. This suggests a significant bloc of Palestinians who oppose the deal on its merits but see no better options, as the pollsters pointed out in their analysis.<sup>133</sup> Hamas could observe these subtle details because its leaders read these polls closely out of a cultural concern for social information that Fatah did not share.

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<sup>131</sup> Survey Research Unit, "Unemployment, Jordanian-Israeli Treaty, Armed Operations, Elections, and Other Issues," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, November 19, 1994).

<sup>132</sup> Survey Research Unit, "Palestinian Elections and the Hebron Massacre."

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

By July 1994, all of Fatah's leaders had returned to Palestine and the PA had begun governing Jericho and Gaza. Tensions were high due to the slate of Hamas attacks, which frustrated Fatah even as they felt compelled to avoid public condemnation. This changed in October after IQB kidnapped an IDF soldier, who then died in a shootout with the Israelis after they refused a prisoner exchange.<sup>134</sup> Fatah had at this point seen Hamas renege on commitments and use violence intentionally to stifle Fatah's credibility with Israel. Now, Israel cut off negotiations and told Fatah they were being held responsible for Hamas' actions.<sup>135</sup> Fatah was forced to choose between ending the negotiations that had returned it to political relevancy and taking the largely unpopular action of condemning Hamas' strategy which a majority of Palestinians seemed to support. Unsurprisingly, Fatah's cultural inclination towards interorganizational information led them to choose negotiations, and in a swift reaction to the kidnapping the PA arrested 400 Hamas members in Gaza.<sup>136</sup> Arafat was also able to seize the reins of the conflict as he mobilized the formal Fatah organizational apparatus—rather than the PA or PLO—to combat Hamas, in order to reduce the internal conflict to factional feuding that Fatah would surely win given their stronger political support, and avoid the use of PA police officers who would undermine their legitimacy.<sup>137</sup> This definitively succeeded as, by the end of 1994, Hamas' support began to rapidly decline as support for the Oslo Accords rose again.

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<sup>134</sup> Joel Greenberg, "Kidnapping of Soldier Leads Israel to Halt P.L.O. Talks," *The New York Times*, October 12, 1994.

<sup>135</sup> Greenberg.

<sup>136</sup> Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Brotherhood of Anger -- A Special Report.; Palestinian Religious Militants: Why Their Ranks Are Growing," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1994.

<sup>137</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 24.

The first year of the Oslo Accords previewed the dynamics that would bring them to ruin by 2000, dynamics I argue are rooted in organizational culture. First and foremost, as stated, the deal itself could only have been made by an organization with Fatah's culture: floating such that it ignored the demands of the refugee community from which it was born, reactive such that it could pivot away from the insurgency strategy that had originally launched them to prominence. But the Oslo Accord's flaws ran deeper than just an abandonment of refugee's right to return, and left open room for conflict over its implementation, which in turn meant Fatah had to do something it was very much not culturally predisposed to do: maintain its popularity through a rocky implementation.

Fatah's ill-equipped organizational culture left space for the second most important dynamic, the rising popularity of rejectionism, expressed most prominently in Hamas, in response to Israeli violence against Palestinians. Just as Fatah's organizational culture was necessary to their acceptance of the terms of Oslo, so Hamas' organizational culture was necessary to their rejection. Hamas' anchored culture allowed them to perceive a subtlety in the polls and the popular mood: support for a peace deal was contingent and weak, based on the latent threat of continued occupation. Their static culture then pushed a persistent strategy of insurgency—both because it gave them a long-term strategic view and because it prevented changes under frequently recurring uncertainty that, observing in retrospect, may have damaged their legitimacy, increasingly rooted in their commitment to rejection of Oslo's terms and armed struggle as a strategy.

### Strategy 1988 – 1994

Palestinian strategy between 1988 and 1994 was a unique departure from previous years. It saw Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas all investing in civil resistance, but more in line with the past, strategic similarities disguised deep and near-irresolvable strategic rifts. But the Intifada, like Karama, was a watershed moment when the strategic beliefs of the average Palestinian were crystalized in a national mood the militant factions could not ignore, and so sought to co-opt and manage. But this inflection point for the Palestinians happened amidst an inflection point for the world: the collapse of the USSR and the advent of American global hegemony, most acutely expressed in the Gulf War. Before the Gulf War, Fatah could take anti-American diplomatic stances as leverage and reasonably expect Arab nonchalance, if not support. None expected a full American intervention. But in the new, post-Cold War world, the preponderance of relative American military power produced an international system unequipped to restrain or resist U.S. policy. This international structure near-fatally weakened the PFLP and pushed Fatah into accepting the terms of the Oslo Accords, which in turn created a new setting for Palestinian strategy located almost exclusively in the Occupied Territories.

The combination of local changes in Palestine and world-historic shifts in the global balance of power produced strong interorganizational information pushing negotiation amidst initially strong social information pushing civil resistance. Civil resistance withered without financial support, however, until social information became contradictory and muddled as Palestinians celebrated newfound self-governance even as they recognized the serious structural flaws in the Oslo Accords. This undercurrent of rejectionism, increasingly fueled by the violence of radical Israeli nationalists, was only

fully recognized and taken up by culturally anchored Hamas, expressed in their rising use of violence against Israel and civilian settlers. The dynamics produced by the Intifada and the Oslo Accords represent a large structural pivot in the Palestinian National Movement, establishing new strategic problems—and potential solutions—that guide and inform Palestinian strategy in the next decade. As always, how each organization faces these new challenges and adjusts their strategy over time is driven by their organizational cultures.

Terrorism was used only scantily during this period. Part of the PLO announcing a state was renouncing terrorism, and this formally ended terrorism as a strategy for Fatah, though they had not used the strategy since their withdrawal from Lebanon anyway. This renunciation was a response to clear interorganizational information that renouncing terrorism was a precondition to any negotiations, as predicted by Fatah's organizational culture. The PFLP did not agree to renounce terrorism, but nonetheless did not use it—this was not so much a result of their organizational culture as it was a result of their strategic listlessness amidst their rapidly dissipating material strength and political support.

But Hamas' terrorism was indeed rooted in their organizational culture. Hamas was founded as an armed group intending to use violence against the Israeli occupation—but they did not start using terrorism until 1990, did not start using bombs until 1993, and did not start using terrorism in strategic campaigns until 1994. These escalations represent changes in social information: in 1990 that civil resistance was becoming exhausted, in 1993 that Palestinians rejected the terms of the Madrid Conference, and in 1994 most critically as embodying the spirit of popular revenge for the Hebron Massacre

while expressing discontent with the terms of the Oslo Accords. Their static culture drove them to persist in using terrorism during the uncertainty between 1990 and the Oslo Accords being signed, but it was their anchored culture that drove them to escalate when they did. Terrorism was also driven by its natural inertia. Hamas' tactical success in killing Israeli civilians supported the belief that it was an effective strategy, as did the harsh Israeli reprisals and intense reactions. Though there were no real political goals achieved, the delivery of punishment to the enemy was enough to sustain existing beliefs about terrorism's efficacy.

The paths of insurgency and terrorism as strategy became intertwined in this period as the main divide in Palestinian strategy became violence versus non-violence. Thereby its dynamics mirror terrorism in being driven by organizational culture prioritizing information: Fatah's restraint driven by interorganizational information and Hamas' aggression from inertia and, to a lesser degree, social information. The PFLP, however, undertook a very limited insurgency in the Occupied Territories. Their material weakness prevented a serious campaign, but like many others even in Fatah, they believed the Intifada could be escalated into a mass insurgency against Israel—though this was their strategy, its actual practice was severely limited. Opportunities to pivot, as Fatah had done, towards negotiation were dismissed out of hand—this would be a betrayal of the refugees from whence the PFLP sprung, evidenced most strongly in the defection of the PFLP's pro-negotiation Gaza contingent. The PFLP were torn asunder by the death of the USSR and the subsequent discrediting of socialism, Iraq's total defeat in the Gulf War, and the conflicting interests of refugees and Palestinians in the Occupied

Territories; they were left without the organizational capacity or will to change strategy, and so they pursued an insurgency they assuredly knew was unlikely to materialize.

Fatah remained the main proponent of and participant in a strategy of negotiation, and indeed found their first real success on that front with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. For Fatah, the Intifada had been a vehicle for negotiation leverage, as their strategy of insurgency in Lebanon had been since 1974. They had seen since then repeated instances of interorganizational information showing clearly the U.S. would never allow Israel to be defeated militarily and the Israelis could be negotiated with as evidenced in their peace with Egypt; simultaneously they were repeatedly shown they could not rely on the Arab states for support, as Syria and Iraq in particular backed Palestinian proxies and undermined Fatah's leadership. Fatah's floating culture attuned them to these international facts, and their dynamic culture was a necessary permissive condition for them to move away from the insurgency strategy they had long used as their main source of legitimacy. Thus, Fatah's readiness, and indeed eagerness, for negotiations was driven by their organizational culture. Though this was necessary for the Oslo negotiations, it was not sufficient; their weakened international and financial position after the diplomatically disastrous Gulf Crisis, the winding down of the Intifada, and the rise of Hamas as an alternative made Fatah a ripe target for Israel to extract concessions in negotiations. Fatah's culture may have driven them to ask Israel to negotiate, but it was Fatah's acute weakness that led Israel to accept the invitation.

Negotiation, insurgency, and terrorism were each used because the organizations using them believed they could produce a Palestinian state. Yet the defining strategy of this period was civil resistance, which none of the three organizations under examination

seemed to think could achieve their strategic goals. When it was used, it was used in the service of other strategies, that is, mass mobilization for an insurgency or leverage for negotiations. Just as quickly as it was adopted instrumentally in light of the spontaneous grassroots Intifada, it was abandoned once the energy dissipated, grassroots leaders were arrested, and local networks were co-opted by the UNC's. But all of these were predictable and manageable problems that Hamas, the PFLP, and Fatah chose to ignore, and civil resistance floundered because it received such sparse organizational support. Why was civil resistance dropped so quickly by 1992 if it was so singularly popular only four years earlier?

Naturally, the answer is different for each organization. First, for Fatah and the PFLP, successful civil resistance meant supporting independent grassroots leaders in the Occupied Territories, a longtime bugaboo for both organizations. Second, and relatedly, the mass coordination required for civil resistance prevents a single organization getting singular credit for success, so no organization could fully reap the organizational benefits of civil resistance, limiting tactical information. This was particularly an issue for Fatah and the PFLP, who were both in the UNC's; Hamas could at least differentiate its performance by using its own separate institutions. But tactical and social information eventually led them to give up as well, as Fatah began agitating against their independent campaigns and winning street conflicts while average Palestinians expressed their economic exhaustion. Fatah itself was following interorganizational information calling for quiet in Palestine while negotiations in Madrid and, secretly, Oslo proceeded. They were also, alongside the PFLP, facing uncertainty after the Gulf Crisis, leading both to move away from civil resistance and back to their comfort zones of negotiation and

insurgency, respectively. But perhaps most importantly, though civil resistance as a strategy was put to bed, its tactics survived and became commonplace. Demonstrations and strikes continued to see use throughout the 1990s and 2000s, though after 1992 they are tightly controlled by the organizations, limited in scope, and mostly used to indicate public support relative to other factions or as an immediate response to extreme Israeli violence rather than to challenge the occupation strategically.

Palestinian strategy at this time was powerfully determined by organizational culture. Hamas maintained strategic continuity in uncertainty and privileged social information, driving them inexorably toward violent escalation as they captured the now decades-old Palestinian preference for armed struggle. Meanwhile Fatah experimented in uncertainty and privileged interorganizational information, fumbling towards a conditionally successful negotiation that their previous base of refugees disliked strongly and the new base of Palestinians in the occupied territories desperately needed for relief from Israeli repression. The PFLP withered without its base or international support, though found itself winning Birzeit University elections alongside Hamas due to their rejectionist stance. Going forward, these trends only grow stronger. Indeed, Hamas does not change its strategy much for the next 10 years, while Fatah will return to insurgency despite its near complete institutional dedication to negotiation. The PFLP manages to re-enter the political arena briefly as well through rapidly changing strategies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Organizational culture became even deeper ingrained in all three organizations, driving their behavior strongly in the coming period of consistent uncertainty.

### **The Palestinian National Movement: The Second Intifada**

In 1994, the future of Palestinian nationalism was uncertain. Two competing trends had emerged after the First Intifada: Hamas' Islamic resistance and strategy of terrorism and insurgency versus Fatah's statist functionalism based in a strategy of negotiation. The rest of the 1990s saw these divergent trends slowly converge as the new millennium approached. Despite the overwhelming popularity of Fatah and negotiation vis-à-vis Hamas and insurgency, the latent threat of collapse into violence remained until negotiations could resolve the final status issues—which of course included issues without mutually agreeable solutions, especially regarding settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem. Settlement expansion especially began to change the daily lives of Palestinians and change facts on the ground, over time producing an acute frustration among Palestinians that, strategically, pushed Palestinian militant organizations towards hostility and negotiations to the brink of collapse.

Fatah would not sit idly by, however, turning to civil resistance and later insurgency to try and pressure Israel into concessions in stalled negotiations, following an international mood persistently annoyed at Israeli intransigence and an American policy hellbent on securing a peace deal. Radical changes in social information, especially with the advent of polling, would nearly tear Hamas apart as its static culture competed with its anchored culture: Hamas believed in the efficacy of violence, but fewer and fewer Palestinians agreed. As Hamas slowed attacks and settled into an undeclared ceasefire in the late 1990s, Fatah was mobilizing to build pressure for negotiations. The PFLP, severely weakened, shifted its support from Hamas to Fatah as its strategy shifted

towards supporting negotiation and civil resistance. They would all three converge on violent strategy—including especially the tactic of suicide bombing for Hamas and the PFLP—after the burst of social outrage sparked the escalatory cycles of the Second Intifada. Fatah particularly would be burnt by the fire they lit as the 9/11 attacks changed interorganizational information faster than they could strategically adjust and the U.S. became radically permissive of Israel's brutal and disproportionate reprisals. By the end of the Intifada, Fatah would functionally collapse as a military force, Hamas would be severely militarily weakened, and the PFLP would be somehow even weaker than previously. Though in vastly different ways and through distinct processes, the organizational cultures of all three organizations would bring them down strategic roads leading to disaster.

The theoretical goals of this final empirical chapter are threefold. First, this chapter builds on the previous three in showing the impact of culture on strategy, perhaps most clearly in this decade. This period features the most rapid and radical strategic changes for dynamic cultures in Fatah and the PFLP, and almost no change at all in the static Hamas. Simultaneously, the anchored PFLP and Hamas both follow social information closely—Hamas observes long periods of calm and the PFLP lends support to negotiation for the first time when Palestinians support peace, then Hamas returns to violence and the PFLP quickly join them when Palestinian public opinion shifts in the Second Intifada. As ever, Fatah attempts to walk the fine line of managing its political support internally and its newly institutionalized international relationships, both in the service of finally achieving its long-sought legitimacy. Second, the events of this chapter give a more conclusive answer to the contradictions in Hamas' culture as its violent

strategy in and of itself begins to shift Palestinian public opinion—its culturally static stoicism, through the dynamics of intercommunal violence, eventually pushed Palestinians into wider support for violent strategy. Lastly, this chapter tackles the joint theoretical-empirical problem inherent in the Palestinian National Movement: the impossibility of strategic victory. Culture has its strongest effect under uncertainty, and there are few moments more uncertain than the rising feeling in the 1990s among Palestinian militant organizations and the general public that Israel would never permit a Palestinian state on terms Palestinians could accept, and soon after the rapid realization that Palestinian militantism could not force them to do so either. The responses of each organization to that knowledge, laid out in detail through the next chapter, shows strongly that organizational culture is a critical cause of insurgent strategy.

Figure 11: Fatah Strategy 1995 - 2005

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Previous guarantees not to engage in terrorism]	N/A [Organization splinters and pro-terrorism cadres leave]
<i>Insurgency</i>	2000 – 2004	Shooting attacks on Giloh settlement	Experimentation under uncertainty	Strong interorganizational information
<i>Negotiation</i>	(1974) – 2001	Camp David II (2000) Taba Summit (2001)	(Strong inter-organizational information)	Strong social, interorganizational, and tactical information
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	1996 – 1998 2000 – 2001	1996 Tunnel Intifada Early strikes/protests of Second Intifada	Experimentation under uncertainty	Strong tactical information

Figure 12: PFLP Strategy 1995 - 2005

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	2001 – 2004	Karnei Shomron Mall suicide bombing (2/16/02)	Strong social information	Strong tactical information
<i>Insurgency</i>	(1978) – 1998 2000 – 2004	Occasional armed attacks against IDF outposts stop after 1998, restart during 2 <sup>nd</sup> Intifada	(Strong social, interorganizational information) Strong social information	Strong social, tactical information
<i>Negotiation</i>	1999 – 2000	Support for negotiation at PNC	Strong social information	Strong social, tactical information
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	2000 – 2001	PFLP Sixth Congress Report Early protests of Second Intifada	Strong social information	Strong tactical information

Figure 13: Hamas Strategy 1995 – 2005

Strategy	Years Active	Critical Instances	How it started	Why it stopped
<i>Terrorism</i>	(1989) –	Dolphinarium discotheque suicide bombing (6/1/01)	(Strong social, tactical information)	N/A [Strategic inertia from public support for violence and strong belief in efficacy of violence]
<i>Insurgency</i>	(1989) –	Kerem Shalom base attack (1/9/02)	(Strong social, tactical information)	N/A [Strategic inertia from public support for violence and strong belief in efficacy of violence]
<i>Negotiation</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strong belief non-violence could not open Israel to refugees of '48, particularly in Gaza]	N/A [Competition with Fatah over desirability of negotiation]
<i>Civil Resistance</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A [Strategic inertia supporting violence, lack of social ethic from 1 <sup>st</sup> Intifada]	N/A [Belief that civil resistance unnecessarily puts Palestinians in harms way, and violent strategy protects them]

### The Oslo Accords Flounder, 1995 – 1997

#### *Hamas Moderates*

1995 began with a reminder to Palestinians of what was at stake as Jewish settlers in Hebron celebrated the one-year anniversary of Baruch Goldstein's February 25 massacre at the al-Ibrahimi Mosque, gathering to kick, shove, and harass Palestinian

worshippers. Nearby IDF soldiers did not intervene.<sup>1</sup> This incident reflected rising conflicts between settlers and local Palestinians, made far worse as Israel gave settlers permission to conduct armed patrols in early 1995.<sup>2</sup> Consistent harassment from settlers, their incendiary rhetoric about their rights to land promised to Palestinians in the Oslo Accords, and the IDF's nonchalance towards such incidents were the context in which Fatah, Hamas, and the PFLP found themselves for the rest of the 1990s. Such conflict impeded negotiation, made average Palestinians more demanding towards the Palestinian Authority (PA) for protection, and eventually became the central cause of a total collapse of the peace process.

But this was to come; in 1995, despite stalling negotiations, Palestinians were still broadly hopeful about the potential for peace, despite the radical settler movement. A narrow majority believed the peace process would work and opposed armed attacks by February 1995.<sup>3</sup> Hamas was all too aware of these trends and its leadership were alarmed, especially by the PA's increasing power and willingness to hamper Hamas' activities. Cycles of suicide bombings and PA arrests of Hamas culprits pressured Hamas leadership, divided between a more radical set of leaders in Amman and more conciliatory leaders in Gaza.<sup>4</sup> These "inside" leaders had deeper prison and university-

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<sup>1</sup> "Jews Shove Hebron Arabs," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1995, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/26/world/jews-shove-hebron-arabs.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Tessler, "The Oslo Peace Process," in *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Indiana University Press, 2009), 779.

<sup>3</sup> Survey Research Unit, "Armed Attacks, Negotiations, 'Separation', Elections, Unemployment, and Palestinian-Jordanian Relations," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, February 4, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Joel Greenberg, "6 ISRAELIS KILLED IN GAZA BOMBINGS BY ARAB MILITANTS," *The New York Times*, April 10, 1995, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/10/world/6-israelis-killed-in-gaza-bombings-by-arab-militants.html>.

based relationships with secular nationalists, and better understood the legitimacy crisis Hamas faced in 1995 in the face of rising support for Oslo and the PA.<sup>5</sup>

The outside leadership in Amman and Damascus had increasingly strained relations with this younger generation, in large part because three critical leaders—Musa Abu Marzuq, Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi, and Ismail Abu Shanab—had been imprisoned by the Israelis (or the Americans in the case of Abu Marzuq) and were unable to act as bridges between the two leaderships. Hamas' decentralized structure made it easy nonetheless for the outside leadership to issue directives to more radical cells in Gaza; it was this that made 1995 and 1996 a time of confused and sporadic strategy for Hamas. Two trends arose, one from the Gazan moderates and the other from the outside leadership in alliance with Hamas' most infamous bombmaker, Yahya Ayyash. The first trend was, in many ways, a continuation and expansion of the work the Muslim Brotherhood had done before organizing Hamas. Hamas' social institutions were about constructing an Islamic Palestinian identity of community and resiliency, harboring indigeneity through inviting bottom-up participation, even when it did not mean political support for Hamas as such.<sup>6</sup> Hamas believed Oslo was doomed to fail, and therefore time would prove their political position correct, but in the meantime, this wing of Hamas believed it was critical to frame Hamas as a movement that could improve people's daily lives through the practical application of Islamic values.<sup>7</sup> Hamas' attempt to create a more Islamic, more professional, and more constitutively resilient Palestinian is akin to

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge: Hamas's Response to Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538305>. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Sara Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector* (Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n3sw>. 164.

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group, "Islamic Social Welfare Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: A Legitimate Target?" ICG Report no. 13 (Brussels: ICG, April 2, 2003).

the PFLP's goal in the 1960s and 1970s of transforming Palestinian identity from refugee to revolutionary.<sup>8</sup> This was not really a strategic change so much as a tactical change: the plan was still insurgency, it was just not immediately feasible in the minds of Hamas' younger leadership in Gaza.<sup>9</sup>

The second trend was an immediate continuation of terrorism and insurgency. As the younger, more professional wing of Hamas was working to strengthen the efficacy and institutional ties with their civilian infrastructure, more radical leaders in Jordan, disconnected from the social pressures on the Gazan leadership, pushed violence. They did so in affiliation with radical Hamas networks in Gaza, particularly an IQB cell that called itself "the Students of Ayyash", though it's unclear if Ayyash himself was engaged in their operational planning. The Students of Ayyash claimed two suicide bombings in July and August 1995—both against Israeli civilians in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem respectively, and notably not targeting settlers or soldiers.

The Gaza leadership became increasingly concerned with their stagnated popularity and blamed this on the ill-timed violence directed by the Amman leadership. Support for armed attacks against Israeli civilians was extremely low, with only 18% saying they supported them—though support for attacks on settlers and military targets remained solid, both around 67%.<sup>10</sup> Thus armed struggle certainly remained a popular strategy, and one even the more moderate leaders wanted to pursue, but attacks on Israeli civilians were specifically unpopular, contributing strongly to Hamas' continued

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<sup>8</sup> Khaled, *My people shall live*. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza*. 164.

<sup>10</sup> Survey Research Unit, "Redeployment Agreement, PNA Performance, Prisoners Release, Electoral System, and Other Topics," Public Opinion Poll #18 (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, July 9, 1995).

marginalization. Hamas' anchored culture was at odds with its static culture, the organization divided between those who absorbed the social information pushing back on terrorism and those who believed their violence would pay off in the long term.

Nonetheless, even the moderate side of Hamas' split showed their bias towards strategic patience, as their plan centered on slowly establishing a more radical and Islamist social base for an eventual insurgency.

September 1995 was the beginning of the inflection point for these simmering conflicts. Israel and the PA agreed to hold Palestinian legislative elections in January 1996, opening the question of participation for Hamas. The agreement also promised, and delivered, subsequent IDF withdrawals, and an international aid conference promised large sums of financial support for the PA.<sup>11</sup> A secret meeting between Hamas and the PA, the minutes of which the PA later leaked, detailed an arrangement in which Hamas could take the role of loyal opposition and run in elections, the PA would work to limit Israeli arrests and assassinations, and in return Hamas would stop its attacks on Israel, at least before the elections.<sup>12</sup> The Gazan Hamas leadership tried to convince the senior leadership in Amman, to no avail: Hamas would not participate in the elections. Though it barely mattered for a faction polling below the margin of error, the PFLP said it would not either.

Indecision, the promises made to the PA, and the popular mood supporting the elections collectively forced Hamas into an undeclared moratorium on attacks between September 1995 and February 1996. 72% of Palestinians supported the Taba agreement,

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<sup>11</sup> Rex Brynen, "International Aid to the West Bank and Gaza: A Primer," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 2 (1996): 46.

<sup>12</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 27.

roughly the same proportion said they would vote, and only 19% of Palestinians said they would observe a boycott if the opposition called one.<sup>13</sup> In October 1995, support for Hamas sat at 10%, its nadir since polling began, and some accused Hamas' of not participating to avoid losing badly to Fatah.<sup>14</sup> Hamas had a static culture, but that did not mean it was totally incapable of change; here, at least, Hamas' anchored culture won out and terrorism was put on hold in response to social information calling for quiet, drawn in large part from polls.<sup>15</sup>

### *Hamas Divided*

Even though Hamas had stopped its attacks after August 1995, Israel did not stop its campaign of arrests against them. These arrests—by the PA and the Israelis—included PFLP members as well, in routine sweeps of dissidents by the PA and targeted arrests by the Israelis. Reports of torture and other mistreatments of prisoners by the Israelis and the PA increasingly angered the Hamas rank-and-file, who were already displeased at being ordered to stand down. Nonetheless, Hamas held to the agreement with the PA despite the misgivings of its more radical wings, even though December talks with the PA in Cairo had produced no formal agreement; Arafat wanted a unilateral and unconditional ceasefire, and Hamas was demanding the PA protect Islamists from Israeli arrest.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Survey Research Unit, "Taba Agreement, Elections, Jordanian-Palestinian Relations, Evaluation of PNA," Public Opinion Poll #20 (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, October 31, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, "On Palestinian Attitudes Towards the Taba Agreement and the PNA's Assumption of Authority over West Bank Towns," JMCC Public Opinion Poll (Jerusalem: JMCC, October 7, 1995); Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge". 27.; Survey Research Unit, "Elections, Redeployment, Peace Process after Assassination of Rabin," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, December 10, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Graham Usher, "The Politics of Atrocity," in *Dispatches From Palestine*, The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process (Pluto Press, 1999), 85.

arrests aside, there was a noted quieting of the tit-for-tat violence that had persisted for most of 1994 and 1995. This calm lasted until January 5, 1996, when the Israelis assassinated Yahya Ayyash with a remote detonated cell phone.

Arafat sent condolences to Hamas, who were uncharacteristically silent on the question of retribution; there was a declared 40 days of mourning, during which no action was taken. In fact, during this time, the IQB offered the PA in January to observe a “freeze on all military operations” if the PA could broker amnesty for a slate of wanted Hamas members. One of the moderate Gazan Hamas leaders, Ghazi Hamad, said in February, “the majority of Hamas members are now ready to give up – temporarily – armed struggle against Israel and turn to political activity.”<sup>17</sup> The elections, held in late January 1996, were a massive success for Fatah: they won 68 of the 88 seats. At the last-minute Sheikh Yassin had given his blessing to a handful of moderate Islamists to run in the elections, albeit without an affiliation with Hamas, and they won only 7 seats. The elections coincided with withdrawals from Palestinian urban centers in the West Bank, most prominently the largest population center, Ramallah. Fatah was more popular than ever—polled at 55% support in December, compared to Hamas’ 10%—as people saw the Oslo Accords producing tangible results.<sup>18</sup> Exit polls affirmed opposition members largely participated in the elections, rubbing salt in the wound of Hamas’ non-participation for the Gazan leadership, and 60% of Palestinians said they felt secure because of the redeployments.<sup>19</sup> Hamas recognized the enormity of the political problems

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<sup>17</sup> Usher. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Elections, Redeployment, Peace Process after Assassination of Rabin”; Jamil Hilal, “Hamas’s Rise as Charted in the Polls, 1994–2005,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 3 (2006): 6–19, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2006.35.3.6>.

<sup>19</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Armed Attacks, Peace Process, Elections, Unemployment,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, March 31, 1996); Survey Research Unit, “Elections, Redeployment, Peace Process after Assassination of Rabin.”

it faced, and its leaders tried to change strategies in response to the broad social mood and institutional constraints. But they had an organizational culture that incentivized long-term strategy and were hostage to the remnant inertia of their spike in support after retaliating for the Hebron massacre two years prior; even if the leadership recognized the need for a temporary move away from violence, Hamas' culture now bore in it the belief that violence was effective and could be leveraged in crisis to mobilize support.

It was no accident, then, that the two-year anniversary of Baruch Goldstein's February 25, 1994, assault on the Ibrahim Mosque was marked by the first suicide bombing since August 1995, followed the same day by a second bombing. The casualties were larger than previous attacks, with a combined 28 dead and 90 wounded, many severely.<sup>20</sup> Then, a week later, two more suicide bombings killed 29 people, and wounded roughly 140; the last attack, on a Tel Aviv shopping mall, caused the vast majority of the injuries. These attacks, like the July and August 1995 bombings, were claimed by the Students of Ayyash, this time in retaliation for the assassination of Ayyash in January. But the process of claiming the attacks belied the internal confusion in Hamas, as they at first denied responsibility, until the Students of Ayyash published a memo claiming responsibility after the third bombing. In claiming responsibility, the rogue cell also asked that their, "'brother who signed [a previous] statement from Izzeddin al-Qassam calling for a cease-fire to immediately stop distributing these tracts."<sup>21</sup> In an embarrassingly public conversation, the next day saw a pamphlet distributed, signed by the IQB, ordering its members to "immediately and absolutely obey the central decisions taken by the Qassam leadership to halt martyrdom attacks

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<sup>20</sup> Usher, "The Politics of Atrocity." 83.

<sup>21</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 29.

against the Jews.”<sup>22</sup> A press conference on the same day saw two of Hamas’ original founders call for a stop to the attacks.<sup>23</sup> Only a week later, a Hamas leader in Jordan claimed they had never decided to stop attacks against Israel, and a pamphlet issued by the “General Command of the Qassam Brigades”<sup>24</sup> promised more bombings.<sup>25</sup> Each tract issued by the Students of Ayyash as well as “General Command” claimed a basic deterrent logic, that attacks on Israeli civilians would stop when attacks on Palestinian citizens stopped.

The attacks produced devastating blowback for Hamas. The most immediate response was Israel closing the border, which in turn doubled the unemployment rate to 50% among Palestinians—many Palestinians worked in Israel and were now left jobless.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the Israeli government halted negotiations and threatened to revoke its withdrawal from Hebron, meant to be under Palestinian control by April 1996. Perhaps most importantly for internal Palestinian politics, the Americans and Israelis placed new conditions on the PA for negotiations, specifically orders to disarm the Islamists. The PA then escalated its campaign against Hamas; not only did it scale up routine arrests, arresting 1,200 Islamists in the days following the bombing, but also for the first time placed Gazan mosques under PA control. Hamas-affiliated social

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<sup>22</sup> Kristianasen. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Serge Schmemmann, “BOMBING IS ISRAEL: THE OVERVIEW; 4TH TERROR BLAST IN ISRAEL KILLS 14 AT MALL IN TEL AVIV; NINE-DAY TOLL GROWS TO 61,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1996, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/05/world/bombing-israel-overview-4th-terror-blast-israel-kills-14-mall-tel-aviv-nine-day.html>.

<sup>24</sup> The concept of a “General Command” being, confusingly, a splinter group or rogue cell is not new in Palestinian politics; when Ahmad Jibril split off from the PFLP, he founded the PFLP – General Command, intended to give the impression of a larger authority than they actually possessed.

<sup>25</sup> Reuters, “ Hamas Unit Says It Will Resume Suicide Bombings,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1996, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/10/world/hamas-unit-says-it-will-resume-suicide-bombings.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Armed Attacks, Peace Process, Elections, Unemployment.”

institutions, including the Islamic University of Gaza, were raided for information. The U.S. had also begun conditioning aid to the PA on counterterrorism measures being taken against Hamas, and as U.S. envoy to Israel Martin Indyk put it, “We want more stick and less carrot from Arafat.”<sup>27</sup> Arafat and Fatah, acculturated as reasonableists, had no issue with following the interorganizational information to escalation with Hamas.

A poll in late March 1996 paints a complicated picture of Palestinians feelings.<sup>28</sup> The most important response was a 90% support for ending the violence on both sides. When asked about who is to blame for the closure, 30% said Hamas and PIJ, 11% blamed the PA, and a slim majority of 50% blamed Israel. 74% said they were worried about internal Palestinian conflict, reflecting a continued support for inter-factional unity that had long defined relations among Palestinian parties. Relatedly, 32% of Palestinians opposed the PA crackdown on Hamas, while 58% supported it; a significant division, especially to poll-watchers in Hamas. More important to Hamas, however, was that support for armed attacks like the bombings in February and March was at 21%, a small but significant bump in support for attacks on Israeli civilians. This, combined with the far higher support for ending violence on both sides, suggested to more radical sides of Hamas that reactive attacks may be more popular than proactive attacks—in line with the sudden rise and fall of support for attacks after the Hebron Massacre.<sup>29</sup> This did not do much to assuage the pain for Hamas of their new low for support, only 6%, though support for Fatah also dropped.

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<sup>27</sup> Tim Weiner, “C.I.A. WILL PRESS ARAFAT AND ISRAEL ON ANTI-TERRORISM,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1996, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/09/world/cia-will-press-arafat-and-israel-on-anti-terrorism.html>; Usher, “The Politics of Atrocity.” 83.

<sup>28</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Armed Attacks, Peace Process, Elections, Unemployment.”

<sup>29</sup> Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician elected on the Change and Reform list, 2023.; Author interview with Imam and Islamist activist, 2023.

Leaders in Hamas well understood that these attacks were poorly timed and counterproductive. But they had believed attacks on civilians and subsequent PA and Israeli crackdowns would delegitimize Fatah, and that Palestinians would support Hamas as defenders of the tradition of armed struggle; these polls, while certainly not producing those conclusions in objective observers, did add to a stack of anecdotal evidence for Hamas that suicide bombing could work. The harsh Israeli response also helped to affirm the sense that these attacks were a way to hurt Israel meaningfully. The culturally static organization was now in the throes of the inertia of terrorism; Hamas, in the long term, would stick to their guns.

The disconnect between the Amman leadership and the Gazan political leadership drove divergent strategizing because of the differences in their access to information, particularly social information. The Gaza moderates were desperate to open lines of communication with the radicals in Amman; a Hamas newspaper editorial wrote in August 1996,

We don't want the Palestinians to blame Hamas for their suffering, nor are we looking for a confrontation with the Palestinian Authority. We're ready to talk to them. The cessation of our armed actions will be part of an overall agreement with the Authority. And as soon as we get travel permits, we'll be ready to go and discuss the matter with the outside leadership in Amman.<sup>30</sup>

The last time the two groups had communicated directly was in their October 1995 meeting in Khartoum on the topic of elections, when they agreed about a pause on attacks; this editorial underscored the communication disconnect. The Students of Ayyash were acting in the interest of revenge without orders, even though the Amman

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<sup>30</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 30.

leaders supported their actions.<sup>31</sup> But these were also underground cells disconnected from the broader Palestinian community, their access to information limited by security protocols, and more likely to be radical on the basis of their social isolation.<sup>32</sup> A founder of Hamas and West Bank Hamas leader summed up the information disconnect in a July 1996 interview: “the inside leaders [should] have the final word.... They're better able to evaluate the situation than their counterparts outside.”<sup>33</sup> The fiery language of revenge at Ayyash’s funeral was not representative of what Palestinians wanted, especially two months later when the bombings actually occurred.<sup>34</sup> The Students of Ayyash bombings were less a strategic response to new information based on organizational culture and more a result of intra-organizational communication and control dynamics. But culture did matter: the outside leadership lacked access to information, and in this uncertainty, they persisted in using violence due to their static culture pushing continuity. If there was a more active and continuous dialogue between leaders in Gaza and Amman, at the very least it’s likely the Students of Ayyash would not have been so supported by the outside leaders.

### *Tunnel Vision and Fatah’s Re-radicalization*

The most disastrous effect of Hamas’ 1996 attacks was on Israeli domestic politics. The attacks discredited peace in the eyes of many Israelis—or, at least, just

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<sup>31</sup> Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (Columbia University Press, 2008). 210.

<sup>32</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 1st Edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Kristianasen, “Challenge and Counterchallenge.” 30.

<sup>34</sup> Serge Schmemmann, “Palestinians Vow Vengeance at Gaza Funeral of Terrorist,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 1996, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/07/world/palestinians-vow-vengeance-at-gaza-funeral-of-terrorist.html>.

enough to elect the far-right Likud party led by Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu opposed the Oslo Accords and immediately sought to undermine them.<sup>35</sup> He did so with two incendiary moves: vastly expanding incentives and support for settlers and opening an old tunnel underneath the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The latter proved to be more immediately provocative: part of the tunnel, though not the part being opened, passed directly under al-Aqsa Mosque, and Muslims had feared since its 1867 discovery that construction would potentially destroy or damage the mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. Of more immediate concern to Jerusalem's Muslim population was that the tunnel opened into the Muslim Quarter, whereas the previous single entrance was in the Jewish Quarter, and this would mean consistent flows of religious Jewish tourists in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. Extremely religious settlers, most active in and around Jerusalem, were a consistent source of harassment and street violence towards Muslims.<sup>36</sup> Protests erupted, prompting the Israelis to shut down access to al-Aqsa Mosque, and thus began what Palestinians called the "Tunnel Intifada".

Before the Tunnel Intifada, Fatah had been experiencing internal changes. Most of these came at the behest of a popular figure from the First Intifada, Marwan Barghouti. A member of Fatah's West Bank organization since he was 15 years old, Barghouti was a disciple of the late Khalil al-Wazir, in many ways taking up his mantle heading the radical wing of Fatah. He represented a cross-section of Palestinian life—he was a prisoner when he graduated high school where he was tortured by Israelis, a prominent Intifada activist, and a graduate of Birzeit University. He was voted into the Palestinian

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<sup>35</sup> Tessler, "The Oslo Peace Process." 785.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Lawler, "No Way Out: How the Opening of a Tunnel Blocked the Path to Peace in Jerusalem," *POLITICO*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/10/02/western-wall-tunnel-opening-jerusalem-israel-palestine-peace-514531>.

Legislative Council in the 1996 elections, and quickly became a popular figure pushing against PA corruption while also making close contacts with individuals in the Israeli peace camp.<sup>37</sup> Most importantly for Fatah, he led a campaign of Fatah conferences to reinvigorate the mid and high level posts of the organization with Fatah supporters from the West Bank and Gaza, rather than the refugee leaders—most centrally, architects of the Oslo Accords who formed the pro-American wing of the Fatah Central Committee (FCC), e.g. Ahmad Qurei, Nabil Shaath, and Saeb Erekat.<sup>38</sup> Critically, this reshuffling attempt did not extend to Arafat, who still retained his broad popularity and a deep respect among Fatah cadres, even as he worked to prevent efforts to replace his appointees on the FCC. These efforts failed, and Arafat remained in tight control over Fatah with his lieutenants still in positions of authority, but Barghouti nonetheless remained a popular and well-connected figure in Fatah.

As mentioned, Arafat had mobilized Fatah in lieu of the PA police to combat Hamas on the streets, and street fighting between the two factions was common in 1993 and 1994. This mobilization became formalized in one of a handful of subservient organizations Arafat formed, the majority of them PA intelligence and security services, all of which reported directly to him; he built these apparatuses as a way of balancing their perspectives, believing truth would come from averaging their reports.<sup>39</sup> Arafat—and Fatah more broadly—preferred these intelligence and organizational networks for gathering information to polls, believing they better captured the subjective mood and

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<sup>37</sup> “Profile: Marwan Barghouti,” *BBC News*, June 2, 2011, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13628771>.

<sup>38</sup> Graham Usher, “Fatah’s Tanzim: Origins and Politics,” *Middle East Report*, no. 217 (2000): 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1520165>.

<sup>39</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

direction of the Palestinian public.<sup>40</sup> The most effective, popular, and useful of these was Tanzim, Arabic for “organization”. Unlike other Arafat-backed sub-organizations, Tanzim was an explicitly Fatah body, led by Marwan Barghouti and occasionally critical of the PA, though never Arafat. There have been competing claims about the actual autonomy of Tanzim and Barghouti, though interviewees inside and outside Fatah broadly agreed that Barghouti never acted without Arafat’s approval, and evidence to the contrary represented their joint attempts to maintain Arafat’s plausible deniability.<sup>41</sup> Their role as Fatah’s street power made Tanzim and Barghouti central figures when the Tunnel Intifada began.

Netanyahu opened the tunnel on September 23, and protests began nearly immediately. But a more institutionalized response came not because of the tunnel so much as the Netanyahu government’s broader undermining of the Oslo negotiations, in particular his de facto abandonment of final status negotiations and the continued occupation of Hebron, meant to have ended in March 1996.<sup>42</sup> That the final status negotiations would settle the question of sovereignty over holy sites like al-Aqsa made the tunnel a good opportunity for Arafat and Fatah to organize a response that would remind the Israelis why the peace deal was necessary in the first place: Fatah would once again escalate conflict to build pressure for negotiation. Arafat was also bolstered by the

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<sup>40</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with formerly Fatah-affiliated activist and refugee, 2023.; Author interview with Imam and Islamist activist, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Serge Schmemmann, “ARAB-ISRAEL CLASH LEAVES FIVE DEAD IN THE WEST BANK,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1996, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/26/world/arab-israel-clash-leaves-five-dead-in-the-west-bank.html>.

recent Arab Summit in Cairo, which saw unified support for Palestinian claims, plus criticisms of Netanyahu's intransigence and the United States for supporting him.<sup>43</sup> But Arafat and the Fatah leadership, Barghouti aside, were in a more precarious position than they had been in the First Intifada or before, as they had now made promises about the use of violence and controlling the kind of public upheaval they needed to apply pressure. Fatah was as always following interorganizational information—but the combined stances of the U.S. and Fatah's Arab allies had them walking a razor's edge between escalation and quiescence.

This began a tactic Arafat would use often in the coming years: making weakly defined calls for resistance, the opacity of which would allow him plausible deniability while giving a tacit green light to escalation. Thus, when he called on the West Bank and Gaza to resist the "Judaification of Jerusalem", he did not specify the form of resistance, besides calling for a commercial strike, and thus let loose the pent-up energies of increasingly destitute Palestinians. Protests in Jerusalem led by civil society-oriented PLO leaders such as Hanan Ashrawi led to clashes with police but did not escalate into serious violence.<sup>44</sup> The focus for Fatah, which largely took the initiative of this moment in lieu of a politically weakened Hamas, was on Ramallah, Nablus, Bethlehem, and Gaza. The Fatah leadership organized busses of Fatah-affiliated university students to checkpoints near Ramallah and settlements in Gaza, where they clashed with the IDF; the IDF's rubber bullets and tear gas were met with stones and Molotov cocktails, which led in turn to live fire from the IDF, and in a new escalation, return fire from PA security

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<sup>43</sup> "Arab League: Final Communiqué of the Cairo Summit Conference on Mideast Peace and Decisions on New Institutions," *International Legal Materials* 35, no. 5 (1996): 1280–90.

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

forces.<sup>45</sup> PA police and Tanzim cadres also had armed clashes with the IDF in Nablus and Bethlehem, where Palestinians had protested near Jewish enclaves and settlements. The fighting in the Balatta refugee camp in Nablus was particularly fierce, leaving six IDF soldiers dead.<sup>46</sup>

Each clash, occurring over the course of September 26 and 27, ended with a relatively quick ceasefire order; the PA had released a pamphlet calling on Palestinians to “express their anger” on the 26<sup>th</sup>, even as Arafat had told the American Consul in Jerusalem that he was “terribly upset about the clashes”.<sup>47</sup> Given the actions and orders that can be directly attributed to Fatah leadership, the most likely scenario is that PA police and armed Tanzim were incited into returning fire by IDF attacks on protestors, which nonetheless both Tanzim and the police were under orders to permit.<sup>48</sup> From a strategic standpoint, the intent was more civil resistance than insurgency. But the international and domestic responses to the Tunnel Intifada would, to Fatah, signify the utility of violence: most of the international response focused on the fact that the IDF had killed 35 Palestinians and wounded a staggering 800, and pushed a pressure campaign on the Netanyahu government to actualize the tenets of the negotiations, particularly a withdrawal from Hebron.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, Tanzim fighters and Fatah-affiliated PA policemen enjoyed their status as heroic defenders of Palestine, a feeling they would carry forward into the coming Second Intifada.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Graham Usher, “Pictures of War,” in *Dispatches From Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process*, Middle East Issues (Pluto Press, 1999), 118.

<sup>46</sup> Usher.

<sup>47</sup> Schmemmann, “ARAB-ISRAEL CLASH LEAVES FIVE DEAD IN THE WEST BANK.”

<sup>48</sup> Usher, “Pictures of War.”; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Usher. 119.

<sup>50</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

A poll taken during the conflict saw a decline in support for the peace process, nonetheless still high at 70%—this would return to 79% by December.<sup>51</sup> Fatah's support had gone from 55% in December 1995 to 44% in October 1996, most of that support changing to independent—indeed the “none of the above” response was the second most popular at 26%.<sup>52</sup> But these polls showed something important: despite no relation to support for either Fatah or Hamas, education level was strongly correlated with opposition to the peace process and support for armed attacks. For example, 80% of illiterate Palestinians supported the peace process in October 1996, compared to only 55% of college graduates.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, March 1996 polling found that only 15% of uneducated Palestinians support armed attacks, while nearly double that, 28%, of college graduates supported armed attacks.<sup>54</sup> This belied two processes: first, the radicalizing effect of university education in Palestine, and second, the biased information the factions received from student council elections, particularly at Birzeit University, which Hamas and Fatah watched closely throughout the 1990s to measure their popular support.

The general pro-Fatah mood in 1995 won Fatah the Birzeit elections that year; the elections after 1994 had surreptitiously shifted from a winner-take-all to a proportional electoral system with five times as many seats, making a sweep like the Hamas bloc victory in 1994 essentially impossible. But opposition to the peace process and its ongoing failures led to a 1996 victory for the Hamas-led bloc, even despite their severely lagging poll numbers at the time. This was a small consolation prize, but one that did help

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<sup>51</sup> Survey Research Unit, “The Peace Process, Performance of the PNA, Performance of the PLC,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, September 30, 1996); Survey Research Unit, “Armed Attacks, PNA Performance, The Palestinian Legislative Council, Corruption,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, December 28, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> Survey Research Unit, “The Peace Process, Performance of the PNA, Performance of the PLC.”

<sup>53</sup> Survey Research Unit.

<sup>54</sup> Survey Research Unit, “Armed Attacks, Peace Process, Elections, Unemployment.”

preserve a sense in Hamas that there was a small but significant constituency of students that supported even the most radical armed attacks. The 1996 loss was deeply felt for Fatah, though the Islamic bloc's success was in part due to a Birzeit-specific issue; five students had been arrested and held without trial in the PA crackdown after the March 1996 suicide bombings, and Fatah was in part held responsible for the failings of the PA.

The Tunnel Intifada did not change much in terms of the general popularity of each faction, but it did help launch the Fatah bloc to a victory in the 1997 elections held shortly after.<sup>55</sup> Overall, the back-and-forth elections served mainly to reinforce existing beliefs among Hamas and to convince Fatah and Arafat, especially in 1996, that support from young people and students was conditioned on their willingness to confront Israel more vehemently when the peace talks were stalled—and Fatah's subsequent 1997 victory after the Tunnel Intifada only confirmed those beliefs.<sup>56</sup> The Birzeit elections were illusory social information, centering an unrepresentative class of educated Palestinians; Hamas seized on their support as representative not only because of their anchored culture but also because it confirmed their pre-existing notion that violence was an effective strategy.

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<sup>55</sup> Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

Table 4: Birzeit University Elections 1994-1999

Election Year <sup>57</sup>	Fatah bloc	Hamas bloc
<b>1994 (Nov. 1993)</b>	0/9 seats	9/9 seats
<b>1995 (May)</b>	21/51 seats	18/51 seats
<b>1996 (May)</b>	17/51 seats	23/51 seats
<b>1997 (March)</b>	22/51 seats	20/51 seats
<b>1998 (March)</b>	19/51 seats	20/51 seats
<b>1999 (March)</b>	19/51 seats	23/51 seats

The other immediate effect of the Tunnel Intifada was the increased prominence of Tanzim in general and Marwan Barghouti specifically. The PFLP and other groups among the secular rejectionist opposition had been experiencing increasing resignations from their ranks, and though many of these were to return to private life, many were shifting to work with Tanzim, which seemed to represent a radical center: willing to use violence while advocating for the peace process in principle.<sup>58</sup> Barghouti said after the end of the brief conflict, “We are not demanding anything of the Israeli government other than it implement the agreements it has signed. Our protests are not intended to kill Oslo, but to restore it to life.”<sup>59</sup> In this, for a time, Fatah was successful. The Tunnel Intifada had shocked the international scene into action, especially the U.S., which now spearheaded an effort to get negotiations back on track. Fatah had been trying to get the

<sup>57</sup> Michele Esposito, “The Palestine Chronology,” Institute for Palestine Studies, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://chronology.palestine-studies.org/>.

<sup>58</sup> Dan Connell, “Palestine on the Edge: Crisis in the National Movement,” *Middle East Report*, no. 194/195 (1995): 6–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012780>.

<sup>59</sup> Usher, “Pictures of War.” 119.

U.S. more involved in the process in the hopes they would act as guarantor, since it was clear Netanyahu would obstruct the process any way he could. But Netanyahu had pivoted, and it was he who asked for American participation; the Likud government generally was concerned with the strong Arab response to the conflict over the tunnel, as peaceful relations with the Arab states was the primary reason to pursue peace with the Palestinians at all in the Likud view.<sup>60</sup>

American mediation did not go as the Palestinians had hoped, though they tended to blame the mediators themselves rather than write off the U.S. government as intransigently pro-Israel, believing—incorrectly—that once President Clinton was reelected and on firmer political ground he would be more evenhanded.<sup>61</sup> But at the same time, the Tunnel Intifada had reinvigorated Arab political support for Fatah, particularly Egypt; the Egyptians had even sent envoys to support the Palestinian negotiating team.<sup>62</sup> Thus the Palestinians were able to negotiate a withdrawal from Hebron, seen by Fatah and Palestinians more broadly to be a victory achieved on the basis of U.S., Arab, and broader international pressure galvanized by the brief civil resistance and low-level insurgency campaign of September 1996. The reality, of course, was that the Hebron redeployment deal had affirmed a strong bias of the U.S. towards Israel and instituted policies that would allow Israel to continuously renege on commitments by pointing to any Palestinian violence.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Lamis Andoni, “Redefining Oslo: Negotiating the Hebron Protocol,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26, no. 3 (1997): 21.

<sup>61</sup> Andoni. 21.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Andoni. 22.

<sup>63</sup> Andoni. 26.

Whereas previously uncertainty was a result of information scarcity, in the mid 1990s uncertainty was driven by an informational deluge. Polls, elections, university politics, ongoing negotiations, and confrontations with the IDF all seemed to point in different strategic directions. Organizational culture prioritized and neatened this deluge of information along expected patterns. Hamas' insurgency and terrorism strategies persisted under uncertainty as Fatah experimented; Hamas tried to moderate in line with pro-peace social information as Fatah escalated in response to interorganizational information that precluded all-out violence but supported expanded street pressure on Israel. But the depths of Likud's intransigence in negotiations would rapidly change these informational dynamics, and in turn Hamas and Fatah's strategies.

### **Death of the Peace Process, 1997 – 2000**

#### *National Unity, For Now*

Two major events at the outset of 1997 set the Oslo Process on the road to its final collapse. First was the suspension of negotiations. Netanyahu crossed yet another red line in March by approving construction of a settlement in East Jerusalem on the hill of Jebel Abu Ghenim while unilaterally reducing the agreed upon redeployment to only 9%. This infuriated Palestinians, whose support for the peace process summarily plummeted to lows only seen after the Baruch Goldstein attack in 1994. Bolstered by the success of the Tunnel Intifada and rising international support, Fatah leadership broadly agreed their only move was suspending negotiations and returning to civil resistance. The decision to suspend negotiations was made in an emergency Fatah conference in early March, which officially recommended that, "the PA suspend all political and security cooperation with

Israel and called on Palestinians to engage in direct struggle with Jewish settlements and boycott Israeli goods in the PA self-rule areas.”<sup>64</sup> Civil resistance had been a continuous feature of the mid 1990s, albeit in a very limited sense; there were regular commercial strikes in moments of crisis, generally lasting only a day or two, usually accompanied by public demonstrations. But since Israel had withdrawn from the primary urban centers, particularly after the Hebron redeployment, this mostly meant Palestinians protesting Israel without the ability to confront or address any Israeli state apparatus.<sup>65</sup>

Second, in February 1997 Fatah held a “Comprehensive National Dialogue”, a seemingly good sign for negotiations would eventually spell more problems. The meeting included representatives of all the factions—with the exception of PIJ—so they could coordinate a position on the supposedly incumbent and all-important final status negotiations.<sup>66</sup> The PFLP abandoned the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF) a week before the meeting in a show of good faith, but also in response to the PA crackdowns on its activities, their dismal polling, and the broad, sustained popularity of the peace process.<sup>67</sup> It was also no accident that the PFLP felt the strong need to get involved in the process of negotiations as soon as the refugee question was on the agenda; they remained a presence among refugees in Lebanon, and their continued popularity there made them feel obligated to engage in the talks that would determine their fate.<sup>68</sup> They had

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<sup>64</sup> Graham Usher, “References,” in *Dispatches From Palestine*, The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process (Pluto Press, 1999), 176–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fsbd1.32>. 189.

<sup>65</sup> Marwan Barghouti, Ibrahim Ghoshah, and Graham Usher, “Fatah, Hamas and the Crisis of Oslo: Interviews with Marwan Barghouti and Ibrahim Ghoshah,” in *Dispatches From Palestine*, The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process (Pluto Press, 1999), 136.

<sup>66</sup> Barghouti, Ghoshah, and Usher. 136.

<sup>67</sup> Joel Greenberg, “Arafat and His Foes Seek Common Palestinian Ground,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 1997, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/28/world/arafat-and-his-foes-seek-common-palestinian-ground.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Author interview with Palestinian union activist, 2023.; Author interview with senior PFLP politician, 2023.;

conducted approximately 8 armed attacks on settlers and IDF posts between 1994 and 1996, but did not have the capacity or the desire for more than these sporadic shootings.<sup>69</sup> Hamas was also present; a member of its delegation commented, “Hamas is outside the negotiations and doesn't expect much from them, but it will work to strengthen the negotiators, and will stand behind them, even though it may disagree with them.”<sup>70</sup>

The development of greater national unity was not a good sign for negotiations that would require serious unpopular concessions by Fatah to succeed. Fatah’s decision to suspend negotiations a month later was a sure sign that support from the other Palestinian factions had convinced it to take a harder stance than it had previously, in conjunction with the success of the Tunnel Intifada and the swell in international support. This was also the beginning of a strategic shift for the PFLP; after this meeting, they returned to the role of loyal opposition, advising Fatah on negotiation positions and tactics while generally supporting talks. Their armed attacks ended until 2000.

Fatah’s thinking at this time is most clearly expressed in the words of Marwan Barghouti, interviewed after the March 1997 emergency Fatah meeting. Barghouti affirmed Fatah protested in support of peace, but more importantly argued it was the international pressure derived from the Tunnel Intifada that brought about the Hebron redeployment.<sup>71</sup> He also noted that the mood on the “street” was now supportive of a return to armed struggle; Barghouti asserted Fatah’s response should be defending the peace process by, “organizing mass popular protests – demonstrations, strikes, boycotts

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Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with formerly PFLP-affiliated activist and refugee, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism). (2022). *Global Terrorism Database 1970 - 2020* [data file]. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

<sup>70</sup> Greenberg, “Arafat and His Foes Seek Common Palestinian Ground.”

<sup>71</sup> Barghouti, Ghoshah, and Usher, “Fatah, Hamas and the Crisis of Oslo.” 137.

and so on.”<sup>72</sup> Barghouti also laid out Fatah’s strategy vis-à-vis Hamas: Israel must deal with Fatah, or risk empowering violent radicals.

Barghouti also underlined his, and Fatah’s, broader internationalist thinking in this interview. Fatah’s actions in the next years can only be understood in the context of perceived support from across the Arab world; as Barghouti says, “We understand our military weakness vis-à-vis Israel. But we have a passive power. The Palestinians can prevent a comprehensive peace with the Arab world and, without peace, Israel will pay the price.”<sup>73</sup> This makes clear an important point about Barghouti: though he represented a more streetwise, locally grown side of Fatah, he was nonetheless acculturated to Fatah and thought much in the same way as Fatah’s traditional leadership, especially deceased forebears like Salah Khalaf and Khalil Wazir. They too believed victory came through negotiations under pressure, whether by way of military force or diplomacy or internal civil disobedience; but always privileging the practice of politicking, deals with other organizations and states, and managing rather than following the masses.

1997 also saw Hamas get its house in order, after the organizational chaos of the previous few years. In April 1997 Rantisi was released from Israeli prison, and soon thereafter Abu Marzuq—held up in U.S. court proceedings for two years—returned to Amman to manage the hardliners. Both were relative centrists—or, at least, they both opposed attacks on Israeli civilians—and were quickly able to reunite the divided Hamas leadership and formulate a new strategy for the coming years. Particularly concerned about their poor polling and hoping to participate in future elections, the first order of business was affirming there would be no competition with or attacks against the PA,

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<sup>72</sup> Barghouti, Ghoshah, and Usher. 138.

<sup>73</sup> Barghouti, Ghoshah, and Usher. 140.

even when it was forced by Israel to arrest Hamas members.<sup>74</sup> Next, Hamas leaders agreed that armed attacks would not be proactive but only reactive, and even then only targeting soldiers and settlers, reflecting polling that showed support for such attacks and their experience that attacks were popular in response to Israeli violence and markedly more unpopular when done proactively or even too distant from the inciting event, as had been the case with the Students of Ayyash bombings.<sup>75</sup> Lastly, they agreed that international support was increasingly necessary as donations were being clamped down on by the U.S. and Israel: they could no longer fully fund themselves on the basis of private support so long as it passed through financial institutions the U.S. and Israel could pressure.<sup>76</sup>

In line with their static culture, Hamas' strategy remained a long-term prospect, maintaining a low-grade insurgency as a deterrent posture and as a continuous cost on Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza parallel to Fatah's negotiations. In this way, it seemed the two strategies complemented one another, reflecting Barghouti's muted stance on Hamas' armed attacks against soldiers and settlers; Arafat had also made it clear that attacks on Israeli civilians were a red line not to be crossed. Hamas' anchored culture pushed them to moderate in the face of Oslo's sustained popularity and the marked unpopularity of attacking Israeli civilians, but they had staked their legitimacy on their faith in armed struggle, so that trend could not go so far as to pivot to supporting negotiations. Fatah's ability to abandon armed struggle compared to Hamas signals the cultural differences between the two: both rooted their

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<sup>74</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 30.

<sup>75</sup> Kristianasen. 30.

<sup>76</sup> Kristianasen. 30.

original claims to legitimacy in armed struggle, but only a floating culture like Fatah's could countenance such a fundamental strategic change.

Despite their broader moderation towards attacks on civilians, Hamas' strategic outlook was not supportive of Fatah's attempts at civil resistance. Hamas spokesman in Amman Ibrahim Ghoshah said in April 1997,

As long as the protests remain at this level, Israel can absorb Palestinian anger, render it ineffectual and ensure the safety of Israelis in the occupied territories. The PA, on the other hand, believes protests of this scale can be used as a tool in the coming negotiations with Israel... We believe only [armed] resistance will thwart Israel's settlement policies at Jebel Abu Ghneim and elsewhere.<sup>77</sup>

Ghoshah was also calling the protests the beginning of a third intifada—the second having been the Tunnel Intifada. Ghoshah notes that Hamas intends to channel public anger for its political benefit and, usefully for this argument, outlines where Hamas is getting its information on that public anger. Specifically, he cites polls, fastidiously avoiding polls on Hamas' popularity, but noting that a recent poll showed 50% of Palestinians were against negotiation, 50% approved martyrdom operations, and 75% were against PA crackdowns on Islamists; he also noted Hamas' victory in the Gaza Engineer's Association elections. This was a combination of generous rounding and overstatement; JMCC and CPRS polls at the time held support for the peace process at record lows, but nonetheless between 60% and 70% supporting the peace process. Being generous, Ghoshah may have been referring to the proportion of Palestinians who believed that successful final status negotiations were impossible, which was indeed 52%. Though exaggerating, Ghoshah placed support for martyrdom operations—i.e.,

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<sup>77</sup> Barghouti, Ghoshah, and Usher, "Fatah, Hamas and the Crisis of Oslo." 142.

suicide bombings—at 50%, while the real number was 40%, nonetheless an enormous increase from the last measure of 21% in March 1996.<sup>78</sup>

Ghoshah was being interviewed only a week after these polls were released; Hamas quite clearly were avid readers of the polls. Ghoshah also noted, somewhat presciently, that Hamas was not mobilizing for an armed uprising until Fatah was willing to join in the call. In March 1997, Arafat joined an Islamic conference in Pakistan, where he was received warmly and encouraged by the broader Islamic world that Israel was acting malignantly and illegally, encouraging the view among Hamas that Fatah's militancy was on the rise—especially after they had suspended negotiations.<sup>79</sup> Reflecting Hamas' larger cultural patience, Ghoshah noted, “We also know armed resistance will take time to build. If we are on the right path, we are not in a hurry. As I said, the tide is moving toward Hamas and against Oslo, the PA and the so-called peace process.”<sup>80</sup> The truth of this statement was not as obvious then as it would be four years later.

Hamas was also the beneficiary of a small miracle in September 1997. A bungled assassination attempt on a Hamas leader in Jordan led to strong pressure from the Jordanians culminating in the release of Sheikh Yassin. After ten years of Israeli prison, Yassin was no less popular and no less able to corral Hamas into unity. Right away, Sheikh Yassin's presence and public facing pronouncements on strategy made clear his intention to stick to the strategic principles Rantisi and Abu Marzuq had laid out,

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<sup>78</sup> Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, “On Palestinian Attitudes Towards Current Issues,” JMCC Public Opinion Poll (Jerusalem: JMCC, April 10, 1997); Survey Research Unit, “PA and PLC Performance, Democracy, Armed Attacks, Local Councils and a Permanent Status Plan,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, April 12, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Serge Schmemmann, “Did Arafat Abet Violence? A Complex Tale,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 1997, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/26/world/did-arafat-abet-violence-a-complex-tale.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Barghouti, Ghoshah, and Usher, “Fatah, Hamas and the Crisis of Oslo.” 143.

stressing cooperation with the PA and the retaliatory principle of Hamas' attacks. But he also laid out the specific terms of a potential future hudna: "...Israeli withdrawal from all Palestinian lands it has occupied since 1967, the dismantling of all settlements, the release of all Palestinian and Arab prisoners, and noninterference in Palestinian internal affairs after the establishment of an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital."<sup>81</sup> Quite to the contrary of this relatively moderate stance, Yassin also insisted that Hamas' attacks on civilians, while not legitimate under Islamic law, would continue so long as Israel continued targeting Palestinian civilians. But just as Netanyahu's principle of reciprocity was rooted in an impossible standard of social control, so too was Hamas'. It's difficult to believe they were not aware of this fact; their stance on attacks against civilians was either purely cynical justification, or a way to excuse the actions of their radical agents without admitting their inability to control them, in combination with the need to present a more legitimate public disposition.<sup>82</sup>

Yassin's insistence on the legitimacy of suicide bombings was in response to three suicide bombings between March and September 1997. All were relatively small bombs with low casualties and contested claims of responsibility, though all included at least one feasible claimant declaring Hamas did the bombings, likely indicating continued actions by disobedient or isolated IQB cells. But they nonetheless garnered significant support in polls; a March attack saw 40% support, and a September attack 35.5%. The same polls also saw Fatah's support drop to a new low of 37%, making the largest single

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<sup>81</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 31.

<sup>82</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro, "Preference Divergence and Control in Palestine," in *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 235.

Palestinian political bloc the unaligned.<sup>83</sup> This support, while still a minority, encouraged the persistent belief in terrorism in Hamas, which was already culturally prone to inertia.

*Hamas Calms, Fatah Panics, PFLP Refreshes*

Despite their cultural penchant for inertia, Hamas did not conduct any suicide bombings between September 1997 and September 1998. They had shifted to occasional small arms attacks on settlers and soldiers, limited in scope and impact. These proved to be relatively more popular than the suicide bombings, with 50% of Palestinians supporting them and 45% opposing them; this included 44% of Fatah members, and slightly higher support in Gaza than in the West Bank.<sup>84</sup> Hamas was also undergoing an international renaissance: Sheikh Yassin toured the Arab world between February and June, visiting Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Syria, the UAE, and Yemen.<sup>85</sup> There he was welcomed warmly by Arab leaders disappointed by the prospects for the peace process, which did not go unnoticed by Fatah. Hamas was also able to secure some international funding amounting to roughly \$50 million, though the only recorded instances of promised aid went to their social services.<sup>86</sup> During this tour he said often to Arab heads of state that armed struggle, not negotiation, was the way to liberate Palestine. Nonetheless, he also emphasized unity with other Palestinian factions, and

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<sup>83</sup> Survey Research Unit, "Performance of the PNA, the Peace Process, the Status of Democracy in Palestine, and Corruption," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, September 20, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> Survey Research Unit, "The American Initiative, Armed Attacks, Palestinian State, Cabinet Reshuffle, Corruption, Democracy, Election of the President and Vice President, Ownership of Satellite Dishes and Computers, and Subscription in the Internet Service," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, June 27, 1998).

<sup>85</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 31.

<sup>86</sup> Kristianasen, 31.; Graham Usher, "The Meaning of Sheikh Yassin," in *Dispatches From Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process*, Middle East Issues (Pluto Press, 1999), 167.

particularly emphasized they supported the PA, even at time suggesting Hamas' efforts, military and otherwise, were strengthening the PA.<sup>87</sup>

It's important to recall at this moment that Fatah was not reading the polls nearly as actively as Hamas was.<sup>88</sup> As one Fatah interviewee put it, "For us, the polls were irrelevant, and Hamas followed them too much. We knew the people would change their minds if we could get some results from the peace process."<sup>89</sup> In late 1998, this apparent necessity for Fatah—who could not maintain protests, boycotts, and strikes in an economically depressed Palestine—led to a new negotiation push culminating in the Wye River Memorandum. The Wye agreement, signed on October 23, 1998, under U.S. auspices, was meant to force the Netanyahu government to accede to the agreements it had signed. The PA was especially insistent on redeployment from the West Bank in the Hebron Protocol, promises it had vacated based on the PA's supposed failure to satisfactorily deal with Hamas. But like the Hebron Protocol, the Wye memo had several subtle points that belied a serious American bias. Wye further enshrined the reciprocity principle Netanyahu had used to forgo previous redeployments and affirmed that redeployment could only occur when Israel's security needs were satisfied, as determined by Israel itself.<sup>90</sup> Most pressingly for Hamas, it also pushed new CIA-approved requirements for fighting terrorism.

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<sup>87</sup> Usher, "The Meaning of Sheikh Yassin." 168.

<sup>88</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with Imam and Islamist activist, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.

<sup>90</sup> Naseer H. Aruri, "The Wye Memorandum: Netanyahu's Oslo and Unreciprocal Reciprocity," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 2 (1999): 17-19.

The deal was clearly slanted towards Israel, and even then, Netanyahu was reluctant to agree until the U.S. offered to pay for the redeployment, an amount that was estimated around \$1.2 billion.<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, Fatah painted it as a victory, one more step on the path to an inevitable statehood. One Fatah official said of Wye, “The agreement symbolizes the final downfall of the Zionist ideology, which views the West Bank as part of historical Biblical Israel.”<sup>92</sup> Despite the bluster, Fatah understood from its internal and inter-factional conferences, Arafat’s trip to Pakistan, as well as Yassin’s tour through the Middle East that this was potentially the last chance to salvage Palestinian and Arab trust in the peace process; inter-organizational information in the region had begun to rapidly swing towards restarting an armed struggle. In interviews, Fatah leaders recalled the sense that their international support, domestic popularity, and newly pacific relations with the opposition hinged on Wye’s success; as one interviewee put it, “We knew that if Netanyahu did not follow-through [with the Wye redeployments], no one would believe the Israelis would ever withdraw.”<sup>93</sup> Fatah’s 1998 loss in the Birzeit University elections also indicated a drop in popularity. In conceding critical details at Wye that engendered implementation problems and thereby popular opposition, Fatah received critical tactical feedback it would carry into future negotiations: Israel and the U.S. were not interested in a fair deal so much as quiet. This interorganizational and tactical information fed into lessons of the 1996 Tunnel Riots that breaking the quiet with protests and controlled violence could produce concessions.

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<sup>91</sup> Aruri. 28.

<sup>92</sup> Aruri. 26.

<sup>93</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with Fatah official C, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.

Despite increasingly good relations with Fatah, in 1998 Israel had begun earnestly assassinating and arresting Hamas leadership again; three of the four top IQB leaders were killed in 1998, one shortly after the March inter-factional dialogue and the others in September, a month before the Wye Agreement. Rantisi was also re-arrested, leaving Hamas significantly weaker, though not as scrambled as it had been in early 1996. Each of these attacks resulted in protests, street confrontations with PA police, and closures on Palestinian cities.<sup>94</sup> An early October poll, taken before the Wye Agreement, informed Hamas' response: support for armed attacks against Israelis hit a new high of 51%, for the first time in these polls achieving a majority.<sup>95</sup> The continued assassinations had enraged public opinion, and the Wye Agreement was about to constrain Hamas even more than their leaders being killed or arrested; this made an escalation seem necessary, and Hamas escalated the only way it knew how. On October 29, 1998, Hamas' first suicide bombing since September 1997 struck in Gaza. The target was a school bus full of settler's children. A Hamas bomber drove an explosive-laden car towards the bus before being stopped by one of the military escort vehicles present, driven by a 19-year-old Russian immigrant and IDF conscript. He and the bomber were the only casualties.<sup>96</sup>

Predictably, this led to a harsh PA crackdown. Hundreds of Hamas members were arrested, and in a new escalation, Arafat placed Sheikh Yassin on house arrest. This was likely related to his response to the bombing, of which he denied knowledge but also asserted, "Today's action was aimed at soldiers, not kids. How do we know the aim was

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<sup>94</sup> Kristianasen, "Challenge and Counterchallenge." 32-33.

<sup>95</sup> Survey Research Unit, "The Peace Process, Violence against Israelis, Domestic Situation, Presidential Elections and Political Affiliation," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, October 10, 1998).

<sup>96</sup> Deborah Sontag, "Israeli Jeep Blocks a Bomber From School Bus Carrying 40," *The New York Times*, October 30, 1998, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/30/world/israeli-jeep-blocks-a-bomber-from-school-bus-carrying-40.html>.

to hurt kids?" alongside critiques of the PA. His telephone lines were subsequently cut alongside the house arrest, the given reason for which was “speaking out against Palestinian national interests”.<sup>97</sup>

The suicide bombing also antagonized the settler movement. Ariel Sharon, the architect of the 1982 invasion of Beirut—a project which got him legally barred from holding the position of defense minister—was Netanyahu’s foreign minister, and after the Wye Agreement was affirmed by the Israeli government, he issued a call to action on Israeli radio: “Everybody has to move, run and grab as many [Palestinian] hilltops as they can to enlarge the [Jewish] settlements because everything we take now will stay ours... Everything we don't grab will go to them.”<sup>98</sup> Sharon had already been empowered by Netanyahu to construct new settlements in the West Bank, and reinstated financial incentives for settlers. This led to a surge in settlement, with ramshackle hilltop settlements popping up across the occupied West Bank.<sup>99</sup> The Wye Memo also stipulated an immediate return to final status negotiations, which would of course include settlements; creating new facts on the ground made these negotiations more difficult, if not impossible.<sup>100</sup>

Palestinians were understandably upset, though Fatah could do little to channel this rage. Polls saw a new high for support for armed attacks at 53%, though a new question further supported Hamas’ split strategy of reactive attacks intended to support

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<sup>97</sup> The Associated Press, “Arafat’s Men Arrest 100 Hamas Activists,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 1998, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/31/world/arafat-s-men-arrest-100-hamas-activists.html>; Sontag, “Israeli Jeep Blocks a Bomber From School Bus Carrying 40.”

<sup>98</sup> “In Quotes: Ariel Sharon,” *BBC News*, January 11, 2014, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11576714>.

<sup>99</sup> Samantha M. Shapiro, “The Unsettlers,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2003, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/magazine/the-unsettlers.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Tessler, “The Oslo Peace Process.” 796.

Palestinian negotiating: asked about the appropriate response to Israel's Wye intransigence, 16% wanted a "return to Intifada", 14% a "return to armed struggle", and 60% wanted to, "continue the political/diplomatic work and wait for the results of the Israeli elections".<sup>101</sup> As the pollsters put it when analyzing this result, "Palestinian public opinion supports the political approach and opposes the military one as matter of strategic choice; but, at the same time, it supports armed attacks as a tactic, as means of responding to Israeli intransigence and violation of peace agreements."<sup>102</sup> Hamas' near-total quiet in 1999 and 2000 as negotiations progressed seems to suggest they took this finding seriously.

The resurgent right, unhappy with Wye and infuriated by the attempted bombing of a school bus, joined with a discontented Israeli left to dissolve the Knesset and hold new elections in May 1999. This time, Hamas—weakened and recognizing the popularity of negotiation—did not repeat the mistakes of the previous election. Ehud Barak, the new leader of the Israeli Labor Party, won the election and immediately set about reviving the peace process in 1999. Barak was elected in May; by September, he had met with the Palestinian delegation and signed the Sharm al-Sheikh agreement, which laid out a timetable for redeployments and established a southern safe passage from Gaza to the West Bank. Most importantly and reflecting both sides recognizing they needed results quickly to maintain support, they agreed to conclude final status negotiations within the next five months, and to start only a week later.

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<sup>101</sup> Survey Research Unit, "The Peace Process, Public Perception of PNA Performance, Corruption, Status of Palestinian Democracy and Elections for the PNA President and Political Affiliation," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, January 9, 1999).

<sup>102</sup> Survey Research Unit.

Palestinians in September 1999 were generally hopeful, reflected in a rise in support for the peace process to 75% and a decline in support from armed attacks to 40%, from 53% in January. Hamas too was apparently taking a wait-and-see approach. They had undertaken a handful of armed attacks on settlers in August 1999, but after that were seemingly completely restrained: no attacks were claimed between September 1999 and November 2000.<sup>103</sup> But Israel did not fully follow through on redeployments as planned in the agreement by the end of 1999, Barak was approving and building new settlements faster than even Netanyahu had, and at the same time bragging to the Israeli right that he was the only Israel leader who had not transferred land to the Palestinians.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, as final status negotiations began, Barak's position was untenable. Most egregiously, the Israelis attempted to negotiate for a smaller share of the West Bank for the Palestinians. Palestinians broadly believed they had already made an enormous concession—sacrificing 78% of mandate Palestine by recognizing Israel—and now Israel was trying to, without reciprocation, demand they concede even more.<sup>105</sup>

Amidst the failed negotiations, the PFLP had seemingly committed itself to negotiation as it rejoined the PLO in February.<sup>106</sup> But the resignation of George Habash due to old age led to a PFLP conference to reorganize and the ascendance of Abu Ali Mustafa, Habash's deputy who had been with the PFLP since their inception. Like Habash, he was a supporter of armed struggle trying to nonetheless align the PFLP with the views of Palestinians in the new political arena created by Oslo. The PFLP had

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<sup>103</sup> START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism). (2022). *Global Terrorism Database 1970 - 2020* [data file]. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

<sup>104</sup> Ron Pundak, "From Oslo to Taba: What Went Wrong?," *Survival* 43, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 31–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330112331343035>.

<sup>105</sup> Mouin Rabbani, "Rocks and Rockets: Oslo's Inevitable Conclusion," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 73.

<sup>106</sup> Compiled by Terence Neilan, "World Briefing," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2000, sec. World.

consistently polled low, had lost subsequent university elections after the end of the left-Islamist alliance in 1994, and was bleeding membership. The political report produced at their July 2000 conference gives a clear-eyed analysis of Palestinian problems, with some answers, and a vague call to action. The report began with the negative critique of the PA, reflecting an old critique of Fatah: the lack of a social program had left Palestinians economically destitute even after their political liberation. Fatah and the PA had developed, "...a mentality and political performance believing that it is possible to launch a liberation struggle against the occupation, achieve victories, apart from securing the suitable social conditions" and Israel, "manipulated this critical situation to exert as much pressure as possible and escalate the exhaustive war to break the willingness of the Palestinian society to resist."<sup>107</sup> The PFLP's answer was social democracy, and marrying the program to rational strategic assessments that would not be, "isolated within the direct, particular, and temporary issues" or "aimlessly float[ing] around strategic, abstract or general political issues."<sup>108</sup>

But despite the report's continuous calls for scientific objectivity and clarity in forming strategy, the actual call to action is left ambiguous, though all forms of struggle are noted to be legitimate: "...it is a natural right and duty that the Palestinian people should defend itself, resist the occupation through various means of struggle, including armed struggle."<sup>109</sup> Overall, however, the report emphasizes the First Intifada and deemphasizes the armed struggle that preceded it:

Exactly here [in the Intifada] one can observe signs of the fear felt by the Zionist entity, which discovered it was not fighting against

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<sup>107</sup> PFLP Central Information Department, "Political Report of the Sixth National Congress," July 30, 2000. 96.

<sup>108</sup> PFLP Central Information Department. 100.

<sup>109</sup> PFLP Central Information Department. 192.

a regular army, or a group of commando fighters, with due respect to their importance. But it was engaged in a war with an active, energetic, initiative people who can attack, defend, build and pursue. A people who realizes the importance of a workshop, an olive tree, labor force, school, university, media, the danger of a settlement, the value of Jerusalem, a molotov cocktail bottle, the rejection of paying taxes... it is a people that acts as an equal to the enemy, is always ready for confrontation and engagement at each and every corner, crossroads, and on every meter of the arena of struggle.<sup>110</sup>

Accordingly, the PFLP did not reject negotiations in principle here, but were sharply critical of the Oslo process as having, “a spirit and mentality of defeat”.<sup>111</sup> Instead, Palestinians in general and the PFLP specifically should create an alternative to Oslo premised on the inclusive democratic practices of the First Intifada. Predictably, much of the report focused on the unbreakable unity of the diaspora and Palestinians inside the West Bank and Gaza, given the PFLP’s anchored culture; it did not, however, give any role to refugees in the conflict, showing their recognition of the greater political importance of the Palestinians on the inside. Just as it had seemingly gotten on board with negotiations, the PFLP’s Sixth Congress seemed to represent a return to civil resistance via building alternative institutions to the PA and leaving the door open to more violent strategy. The PFLP was absorbing the radicalizing environment as well as the pro-negotiation polling, and civil resistance seemed the best option for resisting the unpopular aspects of Oslo while nonetheless supporting the peace process.

As talks went nowhere, Barak fulfilled a campaign promise in May 2000 that had a major effect on Palestinian strategic thinking: withdrawing Israeli forces from Lebanon. South Lebanon had been occupied since the 1982 invasion, and the withdrawal was regarded as a major victory for Hezbollah, the Shiite Islamic militants who had been

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<sup>110</sup> PFLP Central Information Department. 193.

<sup>111</sup> PFLP Central Information Department. 196.

battling the Israelis there for almost two decades. Hamas was in many ways an emulation of Hezbollah from a Sunni-Palestinian rather than Shiite-Lebanese perspective. Both were nationalist, and both hoped to use a combination of deterrent terror and guerilla tactics to force Israel to withdraw. But Gaza and the West Bank are decidedly not South Lebanon, a mountainous and primarily rural region where it was easy for guerillas to hide from surveillance and bombings alongside consistent ambushes. The flat, open, and primarily urban Palestinian territory was not suited for such tactics. Moreover, operational security was easier for Hezbollah, who had an unoccupied base in central and eastern Lebanon; Hamas had no such adjacent base, and Israel had already spent decades building informant networks and security infrastructure across the West Bank and Gaza.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah's victory was exciting and thereby its strategies enticing. Palestinians celebrated the withdrawal, some pronouncing the slogan, "Lebanon Today, Palestine Tomorrow".<sup>112</sup> Palestinians, now feeling they needed new options for liberation, broadly felt this was an example they could follow.<sup>113</sup> The polls showed much the same thing; 63% said Palestinians should emulate Hezbollah's methods, and only 29% said they should not.<sup>114</sup> Palestinian militants took notice: one Tanzim member noted, "Their [Hezbollah's] victory strengthened our faith in the effectiveness of armed struggle and suicide attacks."<sup>115</sup> Hamas celebrated the achievement as "proving the

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<sup>112</sup> Prof Efraim Karsh Hacoen Maj Gen (res ) Gershon, "Israel's Flight from South Lebanon 20 Years On," *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies* (blog), May 22, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/israels-south-lebanon-withdrawal/>.

<sup>113</sup> Ramzy Baroud et al., "The Intifada Takes Off (2000–01)," in *The Second Palestinian Intifada, A Chronicle of a People's Struggle* (Pluto Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>114</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "Camp David Summit, Chances for Reconciliation and Lasting Peace, Violence and Confrontations, Hierarchies of Priorities, and Domestic Politics," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, July 29, 2000).

<sup>115</sup> Eitan Y. Alimi, "Contextualizing Political Terrorism: A Collective Action Perspective for Understanding the Tanzim," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 272.

indispensability of armed struggle”.<sup>116</sup> Interviewees noted this as a radicalizing moment for Fatah. Many within the organization believed in armed struggle to begin with, having expressed their minority view in the 1997 Fatah conference, and felt doubly frustrated to see it used successfully against Israel while their leadership negotiated with the Israelis for seemingly minute gains.<sup>117</sup> Arafat himself recognized the problem, saying to an Israeli negotiator in June, “the Hizbollah are better than us and ridiculing the Palestinians for pursuing negotiations when, in their view, Hizbollah had kicked Israel out of Lebanon by force.”<sup>118</sup> Hamas was, as ever, following the social information coming from popular support for Hezbollah. Fatah was seeing the same, but more importantly felt uncertainty due to the conflicting support for armed struggle and negotiation both in social and interorganizational information. Most important for Fatah was the tactical information that Barak was willing to withdraw and potentially susceptible to pressure from violence in ways previous Israeli leaders had not been. For Hamas, Hezbollah’s victory was a model for their future; for Fatah, it was a reminder of the successes of their past.

Such was the attitude in July 2000, when a series of failed final status negotiations led to a final push at Camp David. But the Israelis offered only minor concessions on final status issues, and the Palestinian delegation had to answer to a public that had hard red lines. In the end, if there was a deal to be made, it was not one the Palestinians could have accepted at that stage, and a deal the Palestinians could have accepted the Israelis probably could not have offered, of course having to answer to their own conflict-

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<sup>116</sup> Hacothen, “Israel’s Flight from South Lebanon 20 Years On.”

<sup>117</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.; Author interview with formerly Fatah-affiliated activist and refugee, 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Ahron Bregman, *Elusive Peace* (Gardners Books, 2005). 80.

hardened public. Thus, the negotiations failed, and failed such that many began to believe a deal was impossible, that there was no potential overlap between the maximally conciliatory positions of both sides.<sup>119</sup> A Fatah interviewee present at the negotiations said, “I’m not sure the Israelis were serious about a final agreement [at Camp David]. We were certainly serious, and Abu Ammar [Arafat] believed Palestinians would not wait any longer for a settlement, so there was a lot of pressure for us. But if we had taken their terms then, we would not have been welcome back to Palestine.”<sup>120</sup>

Polls generally support this assessment. A poll taken after Camp David’s failure recorded most Palestinians thinking Arafat offered too many compromises; far more concerningly, 47% of Palestinians felt that at least some violence would follow the failure of the talks. 23% believed it was the end of the peace process altogether, and 60% said lasting peace was impossible or definitely impossible. Armed attacks continued to enjoy moderately strong support at 52%. Most prescient among the results were responses to the question of supporting a new Intifada: 60% said they would support it, with 21% strongly supporting. A plurality of respondents, 44%, said that violent confrontation with Israel would achieve Palestinian rights in a way negotiations could not.<sup>121</sup> Fatah did not have to be watching the polls to understand this reaction; Arafat was celebrated in the streets as a hero for not capitulating to Israeli demands when he returned, particularly on Jerusalem.<sup>122</sup> This show of support held an implicit threat: don’t make more concessions, or the next gathering will be not a celebration, but a riot. Arafat and Fatah’s popularity

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<sup>119</sup> Akiva Eldar, “What Really Happened Between Barak and Arafat at Camp David?,” *Haaretz*, September 25, 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>121</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, “Camp David Summit, Chances for Reconciliation and Lasting Peace, Violence and Confrontations, Hierarchies of Priorities, and Domestic Politics.”

<sup>122</sup> John F. Burns, “IMPASSE AT CAMP DAVID: THE PALESTINIANS; Hero’s Welcome for Arafat, From Those Who Showed Up,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2000, sec. World.

were at all-time lows, and the rank-and-file of Fatah were not quiet about their disapproval: Tanzim had organized protests and directed clashes with PA police and IDF forces in the lead-up to Camp David as Arafat threatened that failure would lead to another Intifada.<sup>123</sup> Barghouti said in March 2000, “Whoever thinks it is possible to reach a final status agreement through negotiation would better stop fantasizing. In these matters, we must engage in confrontations. We need tens of battles like the *al-Aqsa* Tunnel.”<sup>124</sup>

The period after Camp David was powerfully uncertain, and predictably this drove Fatah to change strategies and renew violence just as it drove Hamas to end its pause and double down on insurgency and terrorism. Both also had different plans with similar tactics; Hamas sought to direct newly aligned Palestinian forces towards a persistent military resistance against Israel, while Fatah felt it could break the negotiation deadlock and restore some international pressure on Israel by instigating limited conflict as it had successfully done in the 1996 Tunnel Intifada. Hamas was following the trend towards radicalization in social information, particularly from polls, to continue its paused insurgency. Fatah was seemingly just trying whatever it could to both maintain popularity and its relationship with the Israelis. Interorganizational information was pushing for a more confrontational posture, but more than any cultural drive, Fatah simply had little choice at this stage. The razor’s edge Arafat and Fatah had been walking since 1993 would finally cut them as this attempt to pursue diametrically opposed goals failed. Hamas would return to political prominence as the social energy of resistance it

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<sup>123</sup> Alimi, “Contextualizing Political Terrorism.” 274.

<sup>124</sup> Alimi. 271.

represented came to the fore, while Fatah realized the violence it had contained in 1996 could not be perpetually controlled.

### **The Second Intifada, 2000 – 2005**

#### *Ariel Sharon's Big Adventure*

Failed negotiations, resurgent belief in the effectiveness of armed struggle, and a general Palestinian political malaise were the structural causes of the Second Intifada; the proximate cause was Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Aqsa Mosque in late September 2000. The visit was controversial. The PA and Israeli opposition alike warned it would cause conflict, and they were right.<sup>125</sup> Immediately protests broke out in Jerusalem, and spread quickly across the West Bank, prompting clashes between Israeli forces and protestors. The next day, September 29, Muslims leaving prayers at al-Aqsa threw stones at the Jewish worshipers praying at the Western Wall below and their IDF guards, from a height of roughly 60 feet. The resulting clashes in Jerusalem, Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, and Gaza included limited IDF use of live ammunition, leading to a staggering casualty count of 12 dead and more than 500 injured.<sup>126</sup> Far from being a surprising development, most of the Palestinians had been preparing for conflict; in the preceding summer, Fatah had called for weapons training for Fatah youth, released known terrorists from prison, and stockpiled food and medical supplies.<sup>127</sup> It was reported from an anonymous Tanzim source that Arafat met with Barghouti the day after Sharon's visit and allegedly said, "I

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<sup>125</sup> Tessler, "The Oslo Peace Process." 809.

<sup>126</sup> Tessler. 809.

<sup>127</sup> Alan Dowty and Michelle Gawerc, "The Intifada: Revealing the Chasm," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2001). 38.

want to light a fire, and I want it to burn the Israelis.”<sup>128</sup> Fatah had returned to armed struggle, hoping to repeat the political success of the Tunnel Intifada—it was routine by now for Fatah to pivot towards escalation when stalled talks produced uncertainty.

The PA took the expected action of declaring a general strike for the next day, September 30. Similar dynamics to the 1996 clashes emerged in the first days as protests and riots clashed with Israeli forces who began to use rubber bullets or live fire to disperse crowds, leading to PA police and armed paramilitary units aligned with Fatah or Hamas to return fire. But this new uprising quickly became distinct from the 1996 clashes and the First Intifada in two interrelated ways. First, violence was more readily used by Palestinians against the IDF and settlers, with frequent gunfire from protesting crowds and apartment buildings near settlements. Already predisposed to disproportionate response by the withdrawal from Lebanon and fears it would encourage Palestinian violence, the increased use of violence from Palestinians led the IDF’s use of excessive force against protestors as an intentional deterrent to Palestinian resistance.<sup>129</sup> This increased the cost of participation in even non-violent resistance, with predictable results: fewer Palestinians participated.<sup>130</sup> Thus attempts by Barghouti and Fatah to replay the Tunnel Intifada, which had won them the Hebron redeployment and international diplomatic pressure on Israel, were made inert by an immediate inability to mobilize the masses.

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<sup>128</sup> Joanna McGeary, “The Many Minds of Arafat,” *Time*, October 23, 2000, <https://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2047960,00.html>.

<sup>129</sup> Charles Enderlin, *Shattered Dreams: The Failure of the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1995 to 2002* (New York: Other Press, 2003). 296.; Yoram Peri, *Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy*, First Edition (Washington D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006). 157.

<sup>130</sup> Alimi, “Contextualizing Political Terrorism.” 275.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

Nonetheless, Fatah was encouraged by interorganizational information to continue the Intifada: the October 7 UNSC Resolution 1322 condemned Sharon's visit, specifically condemned "acts of violence, especially the excessive use of force against Palestinians", and called upon Israel to observe the responsibilities as an occupying power specified in the Geneva Conventions.<sup>131</sup> The violence also reinvigorated interest in the peace process—so strategically, for Fatah, the first weeks of the Intifada were encouraging. But they made little progress. U.S. President Clinton was on his way out of office, as was Ehud Barak, both to be replaced by leaders much further to the right and less supportive of a peace deal: George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon. The last gasp of final status negotiations in the Egyptian town of Taba. Though some breakthroughs were made, it nonetheless failed to produce any written deal. By the end of the meeting, on January 27, 2001, hundreds of Palestinians had been killed by as well as dozens of Israelis.<sup>132</sup> Though it took until Taba to make it official, for Hamas, Tanzim, and a wider swath of militant Palestinians, the peace process had been dead since September.

The Second Intifada began in its initial days with mostly protests, strikes, and light armed clashes. The factions unified a command in the National and Islamic Forces (NIF), featuring every major faction, including Hamas, Fatah, and the PFLP. The NIF's role, like the UNCs in the First Intifada, was generally to issue statements coordinating mass actions and positions. Fatah began its new strategy of firing small arms at Israeli checkpoints and settlements, particularly in Jerusalem, as a way of spreading panic and registering discontent. But the violence also played a psychological role; Palestinians felt they were reclaiming their agency. As one Tanzim leader told *Time* about the shooting

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<sup>131</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1322," October 7, 2000.

<sup>132</sup> Tessler, "The Oslo Peace Process." 812.

attacks, “It felt so good to be hitting them.”<sup>133</sup> Being unleashed by the leadership to fight the occupation that had for so long immiserated them produced a pleasure of agency among Palestinians that, for some, overrode the physical danger of participation.<sup>134</sup> This seemed to also affect feelings for Arafat among fighters; a DFLP leader said, “He's once again the fighter we knew before.”<sup>135</sup>

The NIF was not, however, taking marching orders from Arafat. Arafat had permitted Fatah's militants to begin an armed struggle as a strategy, but operations were handled by Barghouti and mid-level cadre leaders.<sup>136</sup> Fatah's cultural influence maintained a dominant role, however, as the NIF simultaneously pushed a hardline armed struggle while calling for international support—even going so far as to request UN peacekeepers in early 2001.<sup>137</sup> The contradictory positions were a result of the NIF's nature as a coalition. Hamas would probably prefer not to have international peacekeepers around but accepted the stance as a conciliatory measure towards the still-dominant Fatah. The NIF also took a harder stance against the peace process, with one statement before Taba imploring Arafat to decline the terms Israel and the U.S. were offering, noting they “...[reject] a return to the so-called security coordination regardless of any condition.”<sup>138</sup> This, more than any other position, affirmed the NIF's fundamental

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<sup>133</sup> McGeary, “The Many Minds of Arafat.”

<sup>134</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808685>.

<sup>135</sup> McGeary, “The Many Minds of Arafat.”

<sup>136</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

<sup>137</sup> Palestinian National and Islamic Forces, “An Urgent Message To the Friendly Political Parties and Forces and NGOs All over the World” (Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, March 18, 2001), <http://web.archive.org/web/20050215194944/http://www.jmcc.org/banner/banner1/bayan/factionlet.htm>.

<sup>138</sup> Palestinian National and Islamic Forces, “Letter Addressed to President Arafat from the Palestinian National and Islamic Forces” (Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, January 13, 2001), <http://web.archive.org/web/20050215194944/http://www.jmcc.org/banner/banner1/bayan/factionlet.htm>.

challenge to the peace process and the PA: for Palestinians involved in the NIF, Oslo created a new system of Israeli management rather than real liberation.<sup>139</sup>

The PA scrupulously avoided conflict with these forces, mostly because Fatah's participation in militancy and simultaneous position as the main force in the PA made it politically inert. Barghouti and the majority of Fatah's rank-and-file wanted to use a sustained insurgency to force a negotiated Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, as opposed to PA officials' desire for a more limited confrontation that it could convert into Israeli concessions in a negotiation on final status issues. Arafat, according to interviewees familiar with his thinking at this time, was fine with either outcome, preserving plausible deniability by deploying Barghouti and Tanzim, permitting the NIF's militancy, and supplying off-the-books material support to Fatah militants.<sup>140</sup> This was the major difference in the First and Second Intifadas: instead of civil resistance with minor instances of violent insurgency, nearly from the outset the Second Intifada was a violent insurgency with minor instances of civil resistance, institutionally backed by the top leadership of Fatah (and therefore the PA) and as a result tacitly granted legitimacy as a formal war in the minds of Palestinians.

As mentioned, Israeli repressive measures and the violence of confrontations disincentivized mass participation by the end of 2000, by which time suicide bombings had begun again. The first was by Palestinian Islamic Jihad in early November 2000, and Hamas claimed their first bombing of the Intifada on January 1, 2001.<sup>141</sup> This was the

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<sup>139</sup> Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

<sup>140</sup> Joe Stork, "Erased In A Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians" (Human Rights Watch, October 15, 2002), 125-137. Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian politician and former member of PLO Executive Committee, 2023.; Author interview with Palestinian university professor, 2023.

<sup>141</sup> Stork. 25.

start of Hamas' longest and deadliest bombing campaign to date; there were three more attacks in March, two more in April, and at least one per month for the rest of 2001.<sup>142</sup> Yassin explained in 2001 that Hamas' goal was to force an Israeli withdrawal and create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza through a strategy of mutual harm intended to exact a toll, paid in Israeli blood, for the occupation. Much as social information had spontaneously arisen to support civil resistance in 1988, in 2000 social information was clearly in support of violence, especially as civil resistance became too risky, and violence could be framed as a strategic move to protect protestors from risking harm.

For now, suicide bombings remained Hamas' and PIJ's turf. Fatah, meanwhile, focused on harassing settlements and IDF outposts with small arms fire and mortars, also harassing major roads and highways connecting settlements to Israeli urban centers.<sup>143</sup> These attacks were pushed to further escalation as Israel restarted its assassination program, targeting Palestinian political leaders. Tactical information began to dominate the minds of mid-level leaders directing the frequency and qualitative content of attacks: harshening Israeli reprisals affirmed the success of violence to them, since it meant they were, as one interviewee put it, "getting in their heads".<sup>144</sup> Around this time, members of Fatah's Tanzim, centrally refugees in the camps, formed the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (AMB), meant to be the underground militant counterpart to Tanzim's more above board activities. The AMB quickly became the primary Fatah organ perpetrating violence against Israeli settlers and soldiers, following the broader Fatah strategic line that, as Barghouti put it in early September 2001, "...we would not attack inside the Green Line.

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<sup>142</sup> Stork. 25.

<sup>143</sup> Mark Tessler, "Epilogue: The Post-Oslo Period," in *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Indiana University Press, 2009), 821.

<sup>144</sup> Author interview with formerly Fatah-affiliated activist and refugee, 2023.

The real face of the occupation is the settlements and the soldiers.”<sup>145</sup> The PFLP for its part was participating in the NIF and mostly sticking to Fatah’s strategy; that is, light arms attacks on settlements and checkpoints. In practice, this was mostly just taking potshots on soldiers out of nearby apartments and high-rises. The anchored PFLP were happy to follow social information back to armed struggle, but had not yet pivoted back to earnest terrorism, more for political than cultural reasons; they were still not terribly popular and relied on the institutional structures Fatah controlled.

Arafat made known his personal opposition to suicide bombs inside Israel, particularly after a June 1, 2001, suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. He immediately called for a ceasefire; this was his first attempt to wrest from the Intifada some negotiation leverage, egged on by the U.S. and Europeans who were heavily pressuring Israel to restrain its military generally and to refrain from an immediate reaction in that specific instance.<sup>146</sup> The U.S. brokered an official ceasefire a week later, with Barghouti outside the meeting protesting and declaring “the Intifada will continue until the occupation ends.”<sup>147</sup> By all accounts, the ceasefire failed within the next few weeks—by July Israel was firing tank shells at Palestinian police precincts—but not because Hamas or Fatah did not observe the ceasefire.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Max Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, “Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics,” *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 331.

<sup>146</sup> Deborah Sontag, “Arafat Calls for Cease-Fire, Deploring Tel Aviv Attack,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/03/world/arafat-calls-for-cess-fire-deploring-tel-aviv-attack.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Reuters, “U.S. Cease-Fire Plan Is Accepted by Israelis and Palestinians,” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/12/world/us-cess-fire-plan-is-accepted-by-israelis-and-palestinians.html>.

<sup>148</sup> The Associated Press, “Israeli Tanks Shell Palestinian Police Posts in Response to Attacks,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/13/world/israeli-tanks-shell-palestinian-police-posts-in-response-to-attacks.html>.

The ceasefire collapsed because small instances of violence between individual Palestinians, settlers, and soldiers quickly spiraled out of control until the militant factions no longer bothered observing the ceasefire. Indeed, there were no reported bombings for a month after the ceasefire was announced. This ended officially with a July 1 Israeli helicopter attack in the West Bank, followed the next day by a bombing in Tel Aviv by the PFLP. Separately from the failed ceasefire, this was an important escalation in PFLP tactics: their first bombing inside Israel. Social and tactical information, especially as Hamas' suicide bombings increased in popularity and success, led the PFLP to restart terrorism. The particular tactic of suicide bombing had also begun to take on its own importance for Palestinians, independent of strategic benefits, but rather as a way of symbolically displaying their total frustration, desperation for national liberation, and refusal to surrender.<sup>149</sup> For Arafat, the ceasefire's failure was the first sign that not only was he unable to stop the violence unleashed by the Second Intifada, it was unclear if anyone could. Despite all the militant organizations observing the ceasefire, it failed as much due to Palestinian as Israeli violence.

A July poll, taken just after the ceasefire was announced painted a clear picture: 92% of Palestinians supported "armed struggle", and 70% believed armed struggle had achieved Palestinian national aims better than negotiations could. 70% also said they believed a lasting peace was impossible. Even armed attacks against Israeli civilians, last measured at 36% in September 1997, had risen to 58%. Palestinians were highly

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<sup>149</sup> Nasser Abufarha, *The Making of a Human Bomb: An Ethnography of Palestinian Resistance*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009), 184.

supportive of what can now fairly be termed war with Israel.<sup>150</sup> But, though Fatah had taken a leading role in the fight, its persistent affiliation with the failed negotiation strategy meant that it could not convert support for armed struggle into political support, which had dropped to 29% from 46% one year prior, and Arafat's personal popularity dropped from 46% to 33% in the same period. On the flipside, Hamas' association with armed struggle meant that the newly pro-conflict political environment converted nicely to political support, jumping from 10% to 17% between July 2000 and July 2001.<sup>151</sup>

At the end of the summer of 2001, all the Palestinian factions had joined in a unified armed struggle against Israel. Fatah's attempt to repeat the experience of the brief and controlled violence of the 1996 Tunnel Intifada had seemed to work by July 2001 when the ceasefire was declared. Naturally, Arafat pushed for more negotiations; but this was not 1996, and the cycle of violence initiated in September 2000 could not be reeled in so easily, even as organizations heeded the ceasefire call. International politics were changing from what Fatah was used to—U.S. unipolarity and radical right wing American government made it so Fatah could no longer make cogent predictions about international responses or assessments of international positions. Hamas was in its element, its inability to distance itself from armed struggle ironically paying off, and the PFLP had pivoted away from supporting negotiations at seemingly just the right time, despite its recent decapitation and continued political marginalization.

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<sup>150</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "Armed Confrontations; Chances for Reconciliation; and Internal Palestinian Conditions," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, July 9, 2001).

<sup>151</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "Camp David Summit, Chances for Reconciliation and Lasting Peace, Violence and Confrontations, Hierarchies of Priorities, and Domestic Politics"; Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "Armed Confrontations; Chances for Reconciliation; and Internal Palestinian Conditions."

The strategic environment was quickly changing underneath the Palestinians. Their responses were formulated on the basis of organizational culture: the dynamic groups, the PFLP and Fatah, had quickly changed strategies as uncertainty grew, while the static Hamas persisted in the terrorism and insurgency it had always favored. Additionally, Hamas, anchored in West Bank and Gazan Muslim communities, was able to capture and channel social information into popular action, both in its armed attacks and unity with Fatah. Meanwhile Fatah's attempts to do the same were politically unsuccessful, as it had become deeply affiliated with the PA, security cooperation with Israel, and negotiation—Fatah's floating culture drove it to ignore popular input, and in time this grew into popular resentment. The generation that had been mobilized by Karama were dying out, and the new generation had only known Fatah as the ruling party. Tactical information—strong at this time due to continuous conflict with the Israelis—affirmed insurgency and terrorism as strategies, as every faction was able to successfully kill armed settlers and IDF soldiers at rates heretofore unseen. For most of 2000 and 2001, interorganizational information had been supportive too, as the international community condemned Israeli overreaction far more than Palestinian insurgency, if not terrorism. It was reasonable for Arafat, Barghouti, and Fatah's leaders broadly to feel they were close to forcing Israel into a withdrawal, or at least getting a better deal in a negotiated withdrawal, given their cultural preference towards the international. Such was the strategic atmosphere on the eve of one of international history's most important inflection points: the 9/11 attacks.

*The War of Terror*

The September 2001 al-Qaeda attack on New York City was the largest shock to the international system in decades, and the most rapid change in the Palestinian's international standing since Egypt sued for peace with Israel in 1974. Israel had, before September 2001, pursued a harshly repressive strategy to combat the Intifada, tempered by international critics in the U.S. and Europe pushing Barak, and later Sharon, to continue negotiations. Sharon's ascendancy was the first step towards a harder line Israeli policy, but the 9/11 attacks made U.S. President George W. Bush far more permissive of Israel, and it was this change that produced Israel's most aggressive escalations. These included targeting higher echelon political leaders, demolishing the family homes of Palestinians suspected of anti-Israel activity, and, eventually, a reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza by the IDF. 9/11 would scuttle interorganizational information too fast for Fatah, or anyone else, to keep up. The new international mood made Arafat's escalation-towards-negotiation strategy completely unworkable and undercut any hope of international support for the Palestinians, now associated with the radical Islamic terrorism of al-Qaeda. Immediately after the attacks, however, there was a brief period of hope: the U.S. needed Arab and Muslim help to disentangle the al-Qaeda network, presenting an opportunity for the Arab states and the Palestinians to offer their support in return for pressure on Israel to make a settlement.<sup>152</sup>

Bush pushed for peace urgently in September, and Arafat quickly and firmly began reinstating a unilateral ceasefire, calling on PA police to exercise restraint even when fired on. Though it was not clear yet, the interorganizational information as Fatah

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<sup>152</sup> Camille Mansour, "The Impact of 11 September on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 2 (2002): 9.

and Arafat understood it was ephemeral, and the potential opportunity for cooperation inert.<sup>153</sup> But, like before, the ceasefire could not hold under the existing conditions of occupation and Palestinian frustration. Arafat and Fatah saw an opportunity in the burgeoning Arab alliance with the U.S. after 9/11, but those feelings did not extend to the Palestinian public; a mere 16% believed Bin Laden and al-Qaeda perpetrated the attacks, and only 41% counted them as terrorism anyway; a staggering 95% of Palestinians opposed the American invasion of Afghanistan. Perhaps more pressingly, 69% did not think a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians was possible, and 63% believed that, “armed attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel so far have achieved Palestinian rights in a way that negotiations could not”.<sup>154</sup> But Fatah could not adjust quickly enough to new international realities after 9/11, believing that the U.S. need for Arab support gave them leverage, and that pressure on Israel to relent would only increase. In interviews, Fatah leaders noted that they were unprepared for the level of support Bush would give Sharon after 9/11 and underscored that they were hopeful a deal could be struck with the Israelis until approximately the March 2002 attacks. Fatah was as culturally attuned to the international as they could be, and the information they received was intimately linked with their strategy and strategic changes; but the changes in late 2001 were too acute, and drastically in favor of Israel, for Fatah to be able to formulate a strategy in response. Instead, they floundered, and collapsed under pressure.

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<sup>153</sup> James Bennet, “Arafat Orders a Cease-Fire and Israel Pulls Back,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/world/arafat-orders-a-cease-fire-and-israel-pulls-back.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, “Palestinians Support the Ceasefire, Negotiations, and Reconciliation Between the Two Peoples But a Majority Opposes Arrests and Believe That Armed Confrontations Have Helped Achieve National Rights,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, December 24, 2001).

But this would only become clear later. Hope remained in the immediate aftermath: though the ceasefire was not universally observed on the ground, major attacks ceased for the remainder of September, only beginning again in October once it was abundantly clear the ceasefire could not hold amidst small-scale violence initiated by rogue or unorganized Palestinian militants and Israeli settlers. Meanwhile, Fatah was still pushing for more negotiation, even attempting, at Israeli and American urging, to intensify arrests of ceasefire violators in Hamas and the PFLP. The PFLP became a central issue when on October 17, in retaliation for the assassination of their leader, the newly formed Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades assassinated the Israeli tourism minister and launched a suicide bombing against a military base. This was the first suicide bombing by a non-Islamist organization, and it signified a broadening of the tactic; for a brief time at the end of October, Fatah and the PA tried to crackdown on the PFLP alongside Hamas, which had returned to suicide bombing in earnest after a short break observing the September ceasefire. But attempted arrests did not go as before—mobs and riots emerged to prevent any arrests by PA police.<sup>155</sup> The PA had completely lost its authority, continuing to call for a continued ceasefire to no avail.

Amidst the growing chaos, suicide bombings continued apace. Attacks on Israeli civilians were still polling a slim majority support, and armed attacks in general commanded support in polls consistently above 90%.<sup>156</sup> But the Israeli response was harsher than before, reflecting the real post-9/11 change that would persist: complete U.S. support for Israel. American support amidst intensifying bombing attacks permitted Israel

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<sup>155</sup> Mansour, “The Impact of 11 September on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” 16.

<sup>156</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, “Palestinians Support the Ceasefire, Negotiations, and Reconciliation Between the Two Peoples But a Majority Opposes Arrests and Believe That Armed Confrontations Have Helped Achieve National Rights.”

to take a drastic turn in December 2001, declaring it would no longer communicate with Arafat, and moved to reoccupy the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>157</sup> At the same time Arafat was being isolated by the Israelis, Israel had escalated its assassination campaign. The escalations on both sides escaped any centralized control, as shown by the assassination of Raed al-Karmi in January 2002. Al-Karmi was an immensely popular AMB leader in the West Bank, having survived a previous assassination attempt, after which he swore to continue fighting, but notably said, “I will continue killing Israeli soldiers and settlers -- not civilians.”<sup>158</sup> His killing was met with promises of revenge by the AMB, who claimed they had followed Arafat’s ceasefire—until then, when Israel killed the ceasefire alongside al-Karmi. Barghouti released an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* the next day, writing, “I, and the Fatah movement to which I belong, strongly oppose attacks and the targeting of civilians inside Israel, our future neighbor.”<sup>159</sup> The AMB conducted their first suicide bombing against Israeli civilians in January 27, two weeks after al-Karmi’s assassination.<sup>160</sup>

This attack engenders a discussion on what Fatah’s strategy was at this time. I contend that, by this time, Fatah was too fractured to have a real strategy. Arafat publicly pushed only negotiation while Barghouti, probably privately endorsed by Arafat, pushed armed confrontations with soldiers and settlers. Fatah’s strategy ended when the attempt to replicate the Tunnel Intifada spun out of control, and any change was pre-empted by

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<sup>157</sup> Clyde Haberman, “A Fed-Up Israel Turns Its Back on Arafat,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/13/international/middleeast/a-fedup-israel-turns-its-back-on-arafat.html>; Mansour, “The Impact of 11 September on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” 16.

<sup>158</sup> James Bennet, “KEY MILITIA LEADER DIES IN BOMB BLAST IN THE WEST BANK,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/15/world/key-militia-leader-dies-in-bomb-blast-in-the-west-bank.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Marwan Barghouti, “Want Security? End the Occupation,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2002.

<sup>160</sup> Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, “Palestinian Suicide Bombing Revisited: A Critique of the Outbidding Thesis,” *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 3 (October 1, 2008): 493.

the eradication of their command structure by the IDF. The AMB, its leaders also repeatedly assassinated and the networks pushed further and further underground, was likely not taking direct orders from anyone in the formal Fatah hierarchy. After AMB took credit for the 1/27 bombing, Barghouti said, "I have no information, really, about what happened...Fatah's strategy did not change...we tried to prevent any plan that would change policy to attack inside Israel or against civilians."<sup>161</sup> Of course this could be an instance of preserving plausible deniability, but there doesn't seem to be any apparent reason for Arafat and Barghouti to use suicide bombings. The bombings, if anything, had done severe damage to their position, as Fatah tanked in the polls (in December 2001 they reached a new low of 28%) and resistance to the PA grew in the streets.<sup>162</sup>

The claim that Fatah organizationally opposed the bombings and had no control over AMB is supported by their attempt to dissolve the AMB in February 2002: Fatah's leadership met and issued the directive to disband the AMB, and the AMB responded with a clear statement that Fatah's leadership had not created them and could not disband them.<sup>163</sup> The main evidence in support of Fatah, Arafat, and Barghouti directing the AMB comes from a document detailing payments to AMB members by Arafat via Barghouti, but the documents are intentionally vague as to the identity and role of the payees and the individual payments did not exceed several hundred dollars. If anything, the document

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<sup>161</sup> James Bennet, "Arab Woman's Path to Unlikely 'Martyrdom,'" *The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/31/world/arab-woman-s-path-to-unlikely-martyrdom.html>.

<sup>162</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "Palestinians Support the Ceasefire, Negotiations, and Reconciliation Between the Two Peoples But a Majority Opposes Arrests and Believe That Armed Confrontations Have Helped Achieve National Rights."

<sup>163</sup> Stork, "Erased In A Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians" 85.

speaks to Arafat's style of personalistic ad hoc patronage consistently observed since he took charge of the PLO.<sup>164</sup>

Later analyses located the planning and execution of the bombings mostly at the level of local cross-factional networks developed during the Second Intifada as a way of managing Israeli repression and assassination. No one in Fatah sat down and decided to change strategies to suicide bombing, but instead, supporters of Fatah and other secular nationalists aligned themselves with Islamists in the same locale to undertake suicide bombings despite the opposition of Fatah's leadership.<sup>165</sup> This is distinct from Hamas and the PFLP, whose political leadership stated repeatedly their support for suicide bombings, and who—particularly Hamas—seemed better able to control its agents than Fatah. There are numerous examples of Fatah leaders, even those supportive of the AMB in general, decrying suicide bombings and attacks on civilians and arguing the AMB does not obey the political leadership. For example, Hussam Khader, a mid-level Fatah leader, said in an interview with Human Rights Watch that, “There is no Fatah—only people who call themselves Fatah.”<sup>166</sup> Awni al-Mashi, a Fatah leader in a Bethlehem refugee camp, was even more explicit: “The Aqsa Brigades are ordinary people who identify with Fatah and are reacting to Israeli attacks. Anyone could join and shoot at a settlement.”<sup>167</sup>

Indeed, throughout 2002 and 2003 bombings were increasingly self-motivated, as prospective bombers approached organizations to ask for bombs rather than organizations seeking out bombers. There were even reported instances of bombers shopping amongst

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<sup>164</sup> Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>165</sup> A. Pedahzur and A. Perliger, “The Changing Nature of Suicide Attacks: A Social Network Perspective,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (June 1, 2006): 1987–2008, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0104>.

<sup>166</sup> Stork, “Erased In A Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians.” 84.

<sup>167</sup> Stork, “Erased In A Moment: Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians” 81.

factions for willing backers—their organizational affiliation was simply determined by who was willing to give them the means to conduct an attack.<sup>168</sup> More than anything, suicide bombing in the Second Intifada was driven by a cycle of reaction and retaliation; one analysis found that 82% of Palestinian suicide bombings between 2000 and 2005 were reactive, that is, precipitated by Israeli action and declared to be in response to that action by the bomber and/or the organization claiming responsibility.<sup>169</sup> For Fatah, this reactivity was simply because they could not control their supporters conducting attacks in their name even as the leadership practically begged them to stop. For Hamas, reactive bombings were an expression of their explicit strategy of establishing a deterrent posture towards Israel and compelling them to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza, utilizing the social forces motivating suicide bombers as ammunition, ammunition they were able and willing to use due to their cultural disposition towards following public opinion. It is less that Hamas was seeking organizational goals of popularity and recruitment and more that they were following social information that seemed to be clearly incentivizing terrorism.

In this context, it was unsurprising that suicide bombings became more frequent and cross-factional. A spate of bombings conducted by the AMB, Hamas, and the PFLP in March, April, and May of 2002 drove Israel into even harsher repression. The two most significant instances were the house arrest and isolation of Yasser Arafat and the arrest of Marwan Barghouti in April, severing the most important connection between Fatah's leadership and Tanzim, who now either dispersed or joined the AMB. Mahmoud

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<sup>168</sup> Abufarha, *The Making of a Human Bomb*. 189.

<sup>169</sup> Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, "Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada," *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 1975.

Abbas, far more anti-Islamist and pro-negotiation than even Arafat, soon became the new point of contact for the Israelis. Under these conditions, suicide bombings persisted for the first half of 2002, responding to Israeli violence against Palestinians. But Hamas was admitting internally in August that suicide bombing was becoming less popular due to Israel reprisals, even though polling showed consistent strong support for armed attacks on civilians; they could observe exhaustion even as retaliation remained a popular ethic.<sup>170</sup>

A factional dialogue, mostly between Hamas and Fatah, ensued about suicide bombings and whether they were strategically sound as well as the possibility of a unilateral ceasefire, but Hamas had little interest. They had already tried a unilateral ceasefire, and the Israelis violated it until Palestinians on the ground began violating it regardless of orders from above, leading Hamas and even Fatah to stop observing it rather than coerce their supporters and fighters into compliance. Fatah's repeated demand for a unilateral ceasefire and Hamas' refusal were divergent cultural responses to tactical and social information. Hamas would not damage its image by reining in a population that supported violent action without reciprocal Israeli action that would mute the social outcry for reprisal; Fatah, on the other hand, believed their unilateral action was the only way to prompt Israeli reciprocity and end the violence that, by August 2002, had damaged Fatah's popularity severely, polling at only 26% to Hamas' 20%. Indeed, despite concerns about sustainability and the tactical problems of Israeli retaliation, Hamas found majority support for its position: asked about Fatah's demand to end armed

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<sup>170</sup> Beverley Milton-Edwards and Alastair Crooke, "Waving, Not Drowning: Strategic Dimensions of Ceasefires and Islamic Movements," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 3 (2004): 303

attacks inside Israel, 53% opposed the measure.<sup>171</sup> Hamas was being battered tactically, and a strategic analysis on this basis would clearly support reining in violence. But Hamas was now singularly motivated by the social demands for revenge and retaliation, a strategy that had grown its support significantly in only a few years. It was not that Hamas could not see the enormous military and organizational danger suicide bombing posed to them due to Israeli responses, but that Hamas preferred that risk to opposing the clear demands of its social base.

These dynamics persisted throughout the next few years. Pauses in late 2002 and mid-2003 failed for the same reasons as previous attempts: the continued occupation meant at least low levels of repression which produced resistance, then retaliation to the resistance, then an escalation quickly arriving back at open conflict. From a strategic standpoint, little changed after the end of the 2003 ceasefire. Fatah's armed struggle had ended, despite the AMB's continued attacks they were unable to prevent. The PFLP and Hamas continued their campaigns despite increasingly harsh Israeli repression. Hamas would assert its readiness for a mutual ceasefire, recognizing Palestinian exhaustion and facing now fully the impossibility of a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. Nonetheless, Israel spent 2004 assassinating Hamas leaders at an unprecedented level: Sheikh Yassin was killed in March, and Abdelaziz Rantisi in April. Repressive measures hardened as well; for example, a May protest in Rafah was met with Israeli tank fire.

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<sup>171</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "While Sharply Divided Over the Ceasefire and Bombing Attacks Against Civilians, an Overwhelming Majority Supports Political Reform But Have Doubts About the PA's Intentions to Implement It," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, August 21, 2002).

But Hamas could not maintain its retaliatory posture with suicide bombings. Its leadership and bombmakers both decimated by Israeli repression, it lacked the capacity. Rocket fire would come to replace suicide bombings tactically—the first had been fired in 2002, with several dozen fired over the next several years, but they did not kill a single Israeli until June 2004, when Hamas began scaling up rocket attacks.<sup>172</sup> The rockets required far less planning and preparation, making up for Hamas' reduced capacity while also limiting Israel's ability to retaliate effectively. Suicide bombings planning requirements meant the involvement of larger networks for intelligence and logistics, which made it possible for Israel to uproot networks after attacks. Rockets could be fired from anywhere and the militant firing it could be gone before it landed. The death knell for Hamas' organizational capacity came when rockets killed two children in an Israeli border town. The Israeli response was a large-scale operation in Gaza, lasting two weeks and killing hundreds of Palestinians, including many civilians.<sup>173</sup> But in the end, it was successful in drastically reducing Hamas' military capabilities. Support for armed attacks had also been steadily dropping as support for ending hostilities steadily rose; by December 2004, 80% supported a ceasefire and immediate return to negotiation, while only 49% supported attacks on Israeli civilians.<sup>174</sup> This was as clear a sign as any that Palestinians wanted peace.

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<sup>172</sup> Rubin Uzi, "The Missile Threat from Gaza: From Nuisance to Strategic Threat," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* 91 (December 1, 2011).

<sup>173</sup> Greg Myre, "The High Cost of Israel's Gaza Mission: Innocent Victims," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2004, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/10/world/middleeast/the-high-cost-of-israels-gaza-mission-innocent-victims.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, "First Serious Signs of Optimism Since the Start of Intifada," Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, December 5, 2004).

Yasser Arafat died in November, and his death seemed to signal the end of the Second Intifada. Mahmoud Abbas was appointed chairman of the PLO and stood to easily win the January 2005 presidential elections since Hamas was boycotting and Barghouti had agreed not to run. In December, Abbas gave an interview stating that the Intifada was a mistake and that armed action should stop.<sup>175</sup> Each Fatah leader I interviewed repeated this view, with one interviewee saying that, if not for the violence in the Second Intifada, “Palestine would be free by now.”<sup>176</sup> Abbas was elected president in January, and by February there was a formal ceasefire including Hamas and the PFLP. Two-thirds of Palestinians polled in March 2005 agreed that armed attacks had achieved “Palestinian national and political rights” in a way negotiations could not.<sup>177</sup> The Second Intifada was over, though Hamas would not give up its insurgency; it continues essentially the same strategy today, a retaliatory and deterrent posture reliant on targeting Israeli civilians. Though Hamas’ latest attacks in October 2023 were a quantitative escalation, the strategy was still the same: the attacks were intended to punish Israel for its actions in Jerusalem and elsewhere while capturing hostages to be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners and deter Israeli reprisals.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Greg Myre, “Abbas Urges Palestinians to End Armed Uprising,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2004, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/14/international/middleeast/abbas-urges-palestinians-to-end-armed-uprising.html>.

<sup>176</sup> Author interview with senior Fatah official A, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official B, 2023.; Author interview with senior Fatah official C, 2023.

<sup>177</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, “While a Majority Supports a Search for a Permanent Settlement and Opposes Interim Deals and at a Time When Hamas’ Support Increases and Fateh’s Decreases, the Poll Finds a Sharp Decrease in Support for Suicide Bombings Inside Israel and Satisfaction with the Performance of Abu Mazin,” Public Opinion Poll (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, March 12, 2005).

<sup>178</sup> Adam Rasgon and David D. Kirkpatrick, “What Was Hamas Thinking?,” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-was-hamas-thinking>.

### Strategy 1994 – 2005

Palestinian strategy, in total from 1965 to 2005, oscillated rapidly between convergence and divergence. This final period was no different: in 1995 and 1996 Hamas and the PFLP were beginning to believe in the necessity of engaging with the political system established by Fatah via Oslo, but by 2001 Fatah was coming around to Hamas and the PFLP's new insurgency. As ever, Hamas and the PFLP were culturally anchored and therefore primarily strategically influenced by social information, which radically changed in those five years from staunchly pro-negotiation to near-universally pro-violence. Fatah, on the other hand, was culturally floating and thereby followed pro-negotiation interorganizational information; but as negotiations failed, Arab states soured on negotiation and the West began to pressure Israel during confrontations, and Fatah hoped the Second Intifada could cement this trend. 9/11 shattered this dream as the world changed in a few short months to preclude the possibility of a negotiated settlement with "terrorists", particularly in the Muslim world. The evisceration of each organization's command structure and leadership eventually meant there was no longer a Palestinian strategy, only angry networks of Palestinians using violence in cycles of revenge against Israel.

Terrorism had long been a feature of Palestinian strategy, starting with the PFLP's airplane hijackings and Fatah organ Black September's terror campaign of the early 1970s. But Hamas' terrorism—using suicide bombing as its central tactic—was far more deadly, persistent, and strategically central than previous Palestinian terrorism. This qualitative change is rooted in Hamas' organizational culture: anchored in the Gazan and West Bank Muslim communities under near-constant assault by settlers and the IDF,

Hamas was particularly attuned to social information that sought a strategy of mutual harm for the Israelis. This phenomenon finds strong evidence in surveys experiments on Palestinians and Israelis: exposure to political violence makes individuals and their communities more supportive of an ethos of conflict.<sup>179</sup> This dynamic initiated their terrorism, while their static culture—and, at times, the fact of their decentralization independent from their organizational culture—made the strategy persistent. The cycles of mutually radicalizing violence were most intense during the Second Intifada, eventually producing individually motivated and strategically unrestrained terrorism. It was this strong social information that also drew the PFLP into returning to terrorism. But both the PFLP and Hamas were also responding to clear tactical information; from the outset, violence and harsh Israeli reprisals made repeating the mass participation of the First Intifada unfeasible, and insurgency faced serious geographic and material challenges that the relatively weak Palestinian militants could not overcome. Thus, in a context that saw strong support for violence, terrorism was tactically preferable: though still costly, it could at least achieve tactical successes that were unlikely for attacks on military targets.

Insurgency was, nonetheless, used throughout the Second Intifada as well by all three organizations due to strong pro-violence social information after the uprising began. Though tactical information drove Hamas and the PFLP to lean more into terrorism, Fatah maintained a focus on military targets and armed settlers. This was partially because, even as late as 2003, Fatah still maintained a central strategy of negotiation,

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<sup>179</sup> Daphna Canetti et al., “Exposure to Violence, Ethos of Conflict, and Support for Compromise: Surveys in Israel, East Jerusalem, West Bank, and Gaza,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 1 (2017): 84–113, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715569771>.

hoping the conflict would be limited, controllable, and useful as leverage for concessions. Insurgency was ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst; it hamstrung civil resistance efforts by raising the cost of participation for Palestinian civilians and helped produce a pervasive environment of violence where terrorism thrived. But Fatah's floating culture, as ever, prioritized interorganizational information that was strongly opposed to terrorism. This ended up being an unimportant distinction; after 9/11, political violence of any kind being used by an Arab and predominantly Muslim organization was now beyond the pale for the international community, and changes in U.S. policy permitted Israel to crack down harder and equate Fatah's limited violence with Hamas' more qualitatively extreme violence. Fatah's dynamic culture saw them rapidly oscillate between civil resistance, insurgency, and negotiation between 1995 and 2003, but in the end, nothing worked. Pro-violence Fatah members defected to other groups or started their own while pro-negotiation Fatah members finalized Fatah's transition into a purely political apparatus as the PA's ruling party.

As mentioned, civil resistance failed to mobilize in the Second Intifada as it did in the First Intifada or even the 1996 Tunnel Intifada. Both acted as lessons particularly for Fatah, who saw their greatest negotiation successes following civil resistance campaigns. But the Second Intifada's violence made any mass mobilization inert; people could not sustain street action in the face of Israeli violent repression. The Tunnel Intifada had been a small preview of this as PA police and Tanzim fighters were forced to return fire when IDF soldiers fired on protestors; it had not escalated then as it did in the Second Intifada, but by 2001 it was clear there would be no mass action in the style of the First Intifada. But, independent of Fatah's lessons from 1988 and 1996, there was no significant

information pushing civil resistance. Interorganizational information supported negotiation over all else, social information by 2000 was firmly pro-violence, and tactical information pushed either terrorism or negotiation to prevent civilian casualties that civil resistance would certainly have permitted. The only reason for using civil resistance in this context would be an ideological opposition to violence, which could not survive in a population under constant violent attack—not to mention the decades-long assertion that armed struggle was the singular path to Palestinian liberation and the First Intifada's civil resistance producing only the failed Oslo Accords.<sup>180</sup>

Negotiation was the centerpiece of Fatah's strategy since 1974. The Oslo Accords were the pinnacle achievement of this strategy, meant to be the first step to a final victory and a Palestinian state—instead, it produced an unsustainable status quo that collapsed into all-out war. The world over wanted the peace negotiation would bring. For Israel's allies, it would legitimize their often-controversial friend; for Israel's enemies, it would make normalization palatable to their pro-Palestinian domestic population.

Interorganizational information thereby was consistently pro-negotiation. But Palestinians, despite support for a peace process in general, opposed most of the concessions that would make a final settlement possible; social information became a Rorschach test for particularly Fatah and Hamas, each seeing what they wanted, both correct in their own way. Their perceptions were driven by confirmation bias of course, but also their organizational cultures: Fatah believed any opposition could be overcome by their leadership, while Hamas believed they were following the underlying popular will of Palestinians.

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<sup>180</sup> Canetti et al.

But what Palestinians fundamentally wanted was improvements in their living conditions, which never materialized; in fact, as settlements expanded, the settler movement radicalized, and Israeli reprisals against Hamas began interrupting economic activity, Palestinians' daily lives got markedly worse. By 2000, mutual trust between negotiators was non-existent, violence was spiraling out of control, and Israeli politics began a hard shift to the right from which it never returned. Even Fatah was forced to turn to civil resistance and insurgency when it became clear negotiation wasn't feasible without new leverage. Though Fatah was reassured by some interorganizational information—particularly his 1997 visit to Pakistan and seeing secondhand Sheikh Yassin's successful international tour—the overwhelming force of anti-negotiation social information in 2000 gave them little choice. Arafat, after all, was celebrated as a hero upon his return from Camp David for refusing to accept the terms offered, and even the terms nearly reached at Taba were unpopular for most Palestinians. Fatah's organizational culture, as noted in the previous chapter, primed it to pursue a strategy of negotiation: floating enough to make concessions opposed by refugees, dynamic enough to abandon its broadly popular armed struggle. But this same organizational culture doomed it in the end, trusting a peace process that Israel consistently undermined while all but ignoring rising popular discontent. Fatah's preference for interorganizational over social information made it simultaneously the most and least politically canny faction. In the end, their attachment to negotiation marred any attempts to return to armed struggle just as attempts to return to armed struggle ruined any chance at future negotiation, and Fatah's military structure collapsed.

The Second Intifada was the end of decades of continuous planning and pivoting. Palestinian strategy eventually saw its constituent factions backed into a corner, forced to either capitulate to unpopular terms or relaunch an armed struggle with little chance of success. Both the PFLP and Fatah were permanently demilitarized as a result, and Hamas became a blockaded pariah government in Gaza, maintaining a strategy against an enemy that by now was certainly impossible to defeat and unlikely to make any concessions in negotiations. Their effectiveness was probably predetermined, in retrospect. But the strategic paths Hamas, Fatah, and the PFLP took over the course of these four decades were driven by the ways they prioritized strategic information, acted under uncertainty, and responded to changes below and above them: their organizational cultures. Some examples stand out. Hamas could not have stuck to terrorism as long as it did if it were not culturally predisposed to strategic inertia. Fatah could not have secured the Oslo Accords if it were not simultaneously unbound from the popular mood and constantly shifting strategies and tactics. The PFLP could not have even survived these decades of tumult without catering to its refugee base while also constantly experimenting strategically—its adoption of airplane hijacking, civil resistance, and then suicide bombing make it perhaps the most strategically multifarious of all the Palestinian factions. These years of experience and change in the Palestinian national movement show that insurgent organizations' cultures powerfully influence their strategizing, and shows the dynamics of information and organizational culture can explain their patterns of strategic change.

## Conclusion

My first interview was with a popular figure in Palestinian politics, unaffiliated with any of the factions. I hoped, due to her participation in both the Palestinian legislature and the highest levels of PLO policymaking, she could give me an unbiased framework from which to start building my analysis. One thing she said sat in my mind for the remainder of my interviews; when I asked why she thought each faction followed such different strategies, she laughed and responded, “Why wouldn’t they? They don’t agree on anything else—I’m not even sure they agree on what it means to be a Palestinian.” This gets to the root of Palestinian strategic differences: Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas all had distinct conceptions of Palestinian identity that constituted different cultural outlooks.

This project has taken up the task of classifying the cultures of the main Palestinian militant factions and how these cultures manage uncertainty differently; I have argued that this process makes similarly positioned groups pursue different strategies. For all three cases, different organizational cultures meant that, while the goal of a liberated Palestine was shared, and each group understood they had to increase their power to achieve that goal, they all had different conceptions of where power came from and how best to utilize it. These ideas were born out of a combination of initial beliefs and iterative lessons. This was not learning per se, implying a uniform and obvious lesson from experience; new information and new ideas were filtered through culture, new information sorted and prioritized by the ideas and beliefs that constituted each group. Black September taught Fatah restraint, but the PFLP learned from the same events they

needed to focus even more on remaking neighboring Arab countries into revolutionary bases; the Oslo Accords led Fatah to believe Israel could be an earnest negotiating partner, while Hamas saw the deal as signifying Israel's refusal to accept even maximally conciliatory terms from the Palestinians.

After a brief overview of the argument, this chapter will compare the explanatory power of insurgent organizational culture to alternative theories and conclude with its wider policy and theoretical implications.

## **Insurgent Organizational Culture Theory**

### *Information, Uncertainty, and Strategy*

Insurgent organizations face unparalleled uncertainty. There has never been a universally applicable plan to win an insurgency; plans that purport to be universal often have necessary conditions of geography, political economy, population dynamics, relative power of adversaries, or international position that do not obtain in other contexts. Mao's strategic tracts relied on a large population of peasants with existing economic grievances; Castro and *foco* depended in part on access to mountains in which they could hide as well as Batista's strategic and political blunders.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless insurgents draw on the experiences of other successful insurgencies when making their initial plans, but in all cases must make adjustments, exceptions, and refinements as difficulties arise.

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<sup>1</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerilla Warfare: Mao Tse-Tung On Guerilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2017); Joshua Johnson, "From Cuba to Bolivia: Guevara's Foco Theory in Practice," 2006, <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/112872>.

But these changes are not often obvious or universally applied: strategic change requires diagnosis and treatment, which in turn require gathering and analyzing information about strategy and strategic performance. Still, uncertainty persists as new information is abundant. How can an insurgent leadership know if their strategy is working or not working, or even more importantly, *why* it's not working? This requires gathering every kind of information available: information about the constituent population's position, on other insurgent groups and the international community's position, and of course the actual tactical performance of the strategy. These three types of information—social, interorganizational, and tactical—must be gathered and prioritized for insurgent organizations to then decide whether to change strategy, continue the same strategy, or make tactical adjustments to their pursuit of the same strategy. This need to sort information and convert it into action is met by insurgent organizational culture.

*Diagram 1: Theory of Insurgent Organizational Culture*

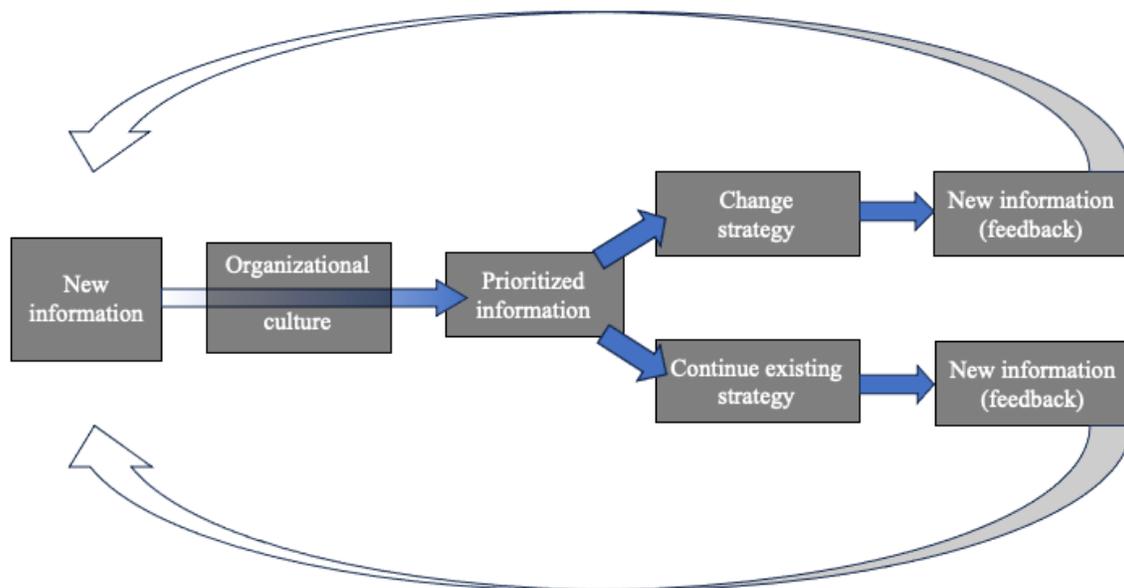


Table 2: Types of Information

	<i>Type of information</i>		
	<b>Tactical</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Interorganizational</b>
<i>Where does it come from?</i>	Immediate effects of and responses to strategic actions	Recruitment, polls, public mood, democratic institutions, social connections	Formal or informal diplomatic statements, financial or military support, changes in international structure or alliances, politics of international institutions
<i>When is it strongest?</i>	Strongest during direct conflict	Strongest during crises, when there are deep institutional connections, and when there is consistent polling	Strongest when states have clear strategic interests and express them materially or through costly action, when international community or other insurgent organizations take unified position

### *Theory of Organizational Culture*

Insurgent organizational culture is comprised of two variables: embeddedness and reactivity. Embeddedness, measured by the depth of connections to the insurgents ethnic or national community, determines what kind of information insurgents tend to prioritize. More embedded or anchored groups prefer social information, while less embedded or floating groups prefer interorganizational information. These perceptions extend to beliefs about power and legitimacy as well, as information is prioritized based on where insurgent organizations locate the crux of their survival. Reactivity, measured by an organization's initial investments in capabilities and organizational structure, determines a group's preferences towards change under acute uncertainty.

Though uncertainty is persistent and pervasive, it varies in intensity. In such circumstances insurgents must choose whether to change or continue their strategy; reactive or dynamic groups will prefer to change, while unreactive or static groups will prefer to persist. Both are cultural qualities, not material qualities: embeddedness does not describe a group's popularity just as reactivity does not describe a group's ability to change, but rather their underlying preferences for information and action. When combined, these two variables produce for potential ideal-types of insurgent organizational culture. Reasonablists are dynamic and floating, Responders are dynamic and anchored, Resisters are static and anchored, and Representatives are static and floating.

*Figure 1: Typology of Insurgent Organizational Cultures*

		<i>Embeddedness</i>	
		<b>Anchored</b>	<b>Floating</b>
<i>Reactivity</i>	<b>Dynamic</b>	<i>Responder</i>	<i>Reasonablist</i>
	<b>Static</b>	<i>Resister</i>	<i>Representative</i>

Identifying organizational cultures is, of course, in the service of analyzing their effect on strategy. Insurgent strategy is divided into four ideal types based on target, government or civilians, and method, violent or non-violent. These are insurgency, targeting the government with violence, terrorism, targeting civilian with violence, civil resistance, targeting civilians with non-violence, and negotiation, targeting the government with non-violence. Each of these strategies contain within them a multitude

of tactics as well. Also, multiple strategies can be pursued simultaneously—though usually one takes priority, one strategy may be used in service of another. For example, terrorism or civil resistance can be used to build support towards a larger mobilization of insurgency; all these strategies might also be used tactically to build pressure on the state to negotiate or make concessions in negotiations.

*Figure 2: Typology of Insurgent Strategies*

		<i>Target</i>	
		<b>Government</b>	<b>Civilian</b>
<i>Means</i>	<b>Violent</b>	<i>Insurgency</i>	<i>Terrorism</i>
	<b>Non-violent</b>	<i>Negotiation</i>	<i>Civil Resistance</i>

Having reviewed the argument in brief, I turn now to a review of the empirics. Insurgent organizational culture theory will be compared against existing alternatives—those being materialist, structuralist, institutionalist, and culturalist arguments.

### **Empirical Analysis: The Palestinian National Movement**

The patterns of strategic change among the main Palestinian militias—Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas—provide strong evidence for the explanatory power of insurgent organizational culture. Retracing the strategic thinking of each organization through the lens of uncertainty, limited information, and culturally-derived preferences towards change and information elucidates dynamics and causal connections not captured in

previous scholarship. Each group's organizational culture, as predicted, deeply influenced the strategies they pursued and how these strategies evolved over time. Fatah are reasonable, the PFLP responders, and Hamas resister; each displayed their predicted preferences for information and change under uncertainty.

In this section I compare the strength of these findings against four other potential explanations. These are the materialists, seeing strategy as driven by relative power; structuralists, arguing strategy is determined by a militant organization's position in the power hierarchy of the broader insurgency; institutionalists, arguing that an organization's internal political institutions are permissive of an ideal strategy combining regular and irregular warfare; and lastly, culturalists, arguing that broader national or ethnic culture determines strategic preferences. I cover each of these in turn.

#### *Alternative Explanations for Palestinian Strategy*

Materialists fail repeatedly to predict Palestinian strategy. Palestinians at every stage were far weaker than Israel, and materialists predict this should drive a strategy of terrorism to avoid direct confrontations with the enemy. But this was not the case, especially in the first two decades under study, i.e., 1965 – 1985. Fatah and the PFLP both did use terrorism in this period, but both focused most of their resources on insurgency; they spent the majority of this time in Lebanon building a conventional military with which to confront the Israelis, losing badly when this confrontation eventually came. Hamas too, despite a focus on terrorism, nonetheless made efforts to directly confront the Israeli military despite its relative weakness. Each of these organizations were following their culturally-derived strategic preferences, rather than

measuring their power against Israel and selecting a strategy on only—or even mostly—that basis.

Structuralists do somewhat better, but still fail to explain the patterns of Palestinian strategic change in important ways. Structuralists predict the PFLP's strategy reasonably well: they often escalated to compete with their peers, both in undertaking an international terrorist campaign in 1968 and returning to terrorism after Hamas in 2001. But organizational culture theory predicts the PFLP's competitive mindset as well: its anchored and dynamic culture makes it seek to change or escalate strategies when it feels other groups' strategies are more popular. But structuralists cannot explain the numerous instances when the factions did not compete. For example, though Fatah saw success in using civil resistance and limited violence in 1996, Hamas remained duly restrained until the Second Intifada, following the pro-peace social information until it suddenly was no longer pro-peace. The PFLP also did not universally compete, choosing to fully cooperate with Fatah's insurgency strategy in the early 1980s despite disagreeing with Fatah on their broader negotiation strategy. Fatah also did not always behave in the broader strategic interest, as structuralists would argue they should at the top of the hierarchy. Instead, they often pursued strategies that benefitted them at the expense of broader Palestinian nationalism; in particular, their near-continuous work preventing an independent leadership in the Occupied Territories and their negotiating the Oslo Accords in secret against the will of the Palestinian diaspora and other militant groups.

Institutionalists fail to explain Palestinian strategy as well. Fatah's political institutions were, by any measure, quite weak. Arafat and his small council of peers on Fatah's executive council exerted heavily centralized control over a network of

competing and isolated nodes of military power. Nonetheless, they were able to muster a significant and relatively capable hybrid force in Lebanon. It was not able to resist an Israeli invasion, of course, but neither were the state militaries of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967. Additionally, not every organization even attempted to field such a force—the idea of a hybrid force is itself rooted in pursuing an insurgency. Meanwhile, though this would change in the years after 2005, Hamas fielded a decentralized force of cells designed to maintain capabilities for an on-and-off terrorism campaign throughout the 1990s and a continuous terrorism campaign in the 2000s. The PFLP also had the most mature institutions of all these organizations for most of these four decades and was never able to develop the kind of capable hybrid force institutionalists predict, even when pursuing insurgency.

Culturalists fare the worst, by far. Every one of these organizations showed a capacity for radical strategic change: each would, at various times, employ every one of the four ideal-typical strategies. None showed some Arab or Palestinian-based preference for asymmetric conflict. In fact, Fatah and the PFLP often pursued more symmetric conflict despite their relative weakness and the enormous associated costs. Though Hamas was focused on terrorism for the majority of its existence, it nonetheless began by using civil resistance, and certainly was not afraid of symmetrical confrontation with the IDF throughout the Second Intifada. Generally, the culturalist perspective is discredited by the simple fact that all these organizations shared a common Arab-Palestinian identity yet clearly pursued vastly different strategies at times.

*Insurgent Organizational Culture and Palestinian Strategy*

Insurgent organizational culture is far more successful at explaining Palestinian strategy. Fatah repeatedly followed interorganizational information even when social or tactical information pointed in the opposite direction; their pursuit of negotiation, with enemies in the Lebanese Civil War, the United States, and Israel alike frequently flew in the face of the Palestinian popular mood and the apparent military rationale. They also changed strategy under uncertainty almost universally, most notably in accepting negotiation in 1974 but also switching to (and then from) terrorism in the early 1970s, pivoting to civil resistance in 1988, returning to it in 1996, then switching to insurgency again in 2000.

The PFLP followed social information nearly to their own elimination; Palestinian refugee anger at Jordan's King Hussein or their support for Lebanese revolutionary forces led the PFLP to engage in conflicts that weakened them militarily, often severely, and angered international sponsors they desperately needed to remain afloat. The PFLP ended up financially dependent on the Fatah-controlled PLO by the time of Oslo simply because they had too often angered sponsors by choosing strategies based on popular mood rather than what their sponsors preferred.

Hamas followed social information closely, infamous for their poll-watching, leading them to escalate their terrorism whenever the popular mood seemed to turn towards violence. But they also rarely changed strategy—despite accepting the necessity of quiet after 1995, a spattering of bombings continued, and they leapt right back into the strategy mere weeks after the Second Intifada began. Their only other change was

beginning to use terrorism and insurgency and ending civil resistance in the early 90s; overall, they were remarkably consistent.

All of these are in line with the expectations of their organizational cultures: they prioritized information and responded to acute uncertainty as predicted, time and time again. But what does this suggest for the broader field of non-state militant strategy? Accepting insurgent organizational culture can successfully explain the Palestinian case, what are the broader implications?

### **Generalizability, Policy Implications, and Future Research**

Three questions arise: how well can this theory explain other cases, what are the implications for policymaking, and what does it mean for the broader scholarship? I tackle each question in turn, beginning with generalizability.

#### *Generalizability*

Limiting the empirics of this study to the Palestinian National Movement allowed the kind of in-depth analysis organizational culture requires but leaves open the possibility that the effect on strategy observed among Palestinian militias is not present or not as strong elsewhere. Certainly, the effect of organizational culture is stronger in this case, which was part of the case selection: in developing novel theory, a most-likely case study is most useful.<sup>1</sup> In the Palestinian National Movement, it's clear in retrospect there was no path the Palestinian militias could have followed that would have guaranteed a Palestinian state. Though they could not have known it at the time, Israeli political will and support from the United States would remain too strong for these militant groups to

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Belfer Center Studies in International Security (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2005), 253.

have a real chance. Without an obvious (or perhaps even existent) strategic solution to the problem, culture becomes more important in determining action.<sup>2</sup> But a most-likely case leaves open the possibility that the same theoretical dynamics are not applicable in other cases where there are not the same friendly conditions for testing this theory. As a brief robustness check, I compare each of the organizations under study—Fatah, the PFLP, and Hamas—to their approximate cultural equivalents in other insurgencies.

Fatah, for example, approximately shares an organizational culture with the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Individually led and controlled by Jonas Savimbi, UNITA was ideologically pliant, focused on small arms, and highly centralized. Though they had engaged in some political work before and after their formal inauguration in 1966, they were Maoists at the time and became avid capitalists after receiving American support; any early political groundwork they did was rooted in their alliance to the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the communist group they would fight a decades-long civil war against. Much like Arafat, Savimbi was simultaneously military and political leader, and spent much of his time lobbying foreign governments, particularly the U.S., for support. UNITA was disconnected from social institutions and focused on relations that abetted its military strength—particularly control over diamond mines.<sup>3</sup>

These qualities in mind, UNITA can fairly be classified as having a reasonable organizational culture: floating and dynamic. Their strategic behavior has similarities to Fatah as well: always with an eye towards the strategic druthers of patrons in the U.S. and

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<sup>2</sup> Long, *The Soul of Armies*.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Pearce, "Control, Politics and Identity in the Angolan Civil War," *African Affairs* 111, no. 444 (2012): 442–65; William Minter, "The US and the War in Angola," *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 50 (1991): 135–44.

South Africa, UNITA changed strategies relatively often, using insurgency, terrorism, and negotiation at various times. A particularly revealing episode saw UNITA renege on a 1989 ceasefire in part because of American pressure to resume armed struggle.<sup>4</sup>

Generally, UNITA also seems to match the expected behavior of a dynamic group as well, changing strategy in moments of acute uncertainty. For example, though they abandoned negotiation for renewed armed struggle in 1989, the changes in international and domestic environment by 1991 limited the long-term efficacy of armed struggle and left the path forward for UNITA unclear. Though they could have continued an insurgency and certainly maintained significant military strength—they would go on to a nearly total military victory a few years later—they chose to return to negotiation. While this is only a brief and shallow overview, the basic facts of UNITA's formation and strategy match the expectations of insurgent organizational culture theory.

The PFLP's best cultural analog is the African National Congress (ANC), the Black South African organization dedicated to ending apartheid. The ANC self-describes as a national liberation movement, skirting questions of firm ideology, and their initial capabilities—when they began their armed struggle—focused on light arms, though they would later use bombings as a frequent tactic.<sup>5</sup> The organization was always highly centralized, especially after formally integrating their military wing in 1962. The ANC also featured a structure that separated political and military wings, with a dominant political wing, with democratic structures in place for electing a collective leadership

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<sup>4</sup> Minter, "The US and the War in Angola," 139.

<sup>5</sup> Saki Macozoma, "The ANC and the Transformation of South Africa," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 2, no. 1 (1994): 241–48.

council.<sup>6</sup> The ANC was always concerned with engaging the popular mood—they preceded their move towards armed struggle in 1960 with pervasive political mobilization and proselytization of Black South Africans.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the ANC can be fairly identified as having a responder organizational culture—dynamic and anchored. Their strategic behavior matches the expectations of insurgent organizational culture theory: in moments of uncertainty, most notably their 1960 exile from South Africa, their persistent military failures recognized by 1975, and Mandela’s 1985 call for negotiation, they changed strategies.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the PFLP, this led them to run the gamut of strategies from civil resistance to terrorism to insurgency to negotiation. They also were most responsive to social information, initiating violence in part due to a pervasive mood supportive of armed struggle among Black South Africans, and restarting a civil resistance campaign inside South Africa in response to loosely organized grassroots movements cropping up in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>9</sup> This brief analysis shows that insurgent organizational culture can explain insurgent strategy across contexts—the shared organizational culture of the PFLP and ANC resulted in similar strategies and even similar patterns of strategic change, if not effectiveness.

Hamas’ organizational culture is best compared to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), often just called “the Zapatistas”. The Zapatistas emerged from

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Wolpe, “Strategic Issues in the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 8, no. 2 (1984): 232–48.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Barrell, “The Turn to the Masses: The African National Congress’ Strategic Review of 1978-79,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992): 64–92.

<sup>8</sup> I. William Zartman, “Negotiation and the South African Conflict,” *SAIS Review (1989-2003)* 11, no. 1 (1991): 113–32; Barrell, “The Turn to the Masses”; Simon Stevens, “The Turn to Sabotage by The Congress Movement in South Africa\*,” *Past & Present* 245, no. 1 (November 1, 2019): 221–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz030>.

<sup>9</sup> Stevens, “The Turn to Sabotage by The Congress Movement in South Africa\*”; Barrell, “The Turn to the Masses.”

decades of revolutionary politics in the Chiapas region in the south of Mexico, most proximately the failed military mobilization efforts of the Marxist group National Liberation Front in the 1970s and 1980s. The EZLN are heavily invested in their libertarian socialist ideology, which demands a decentralized organizational structure, collective democratic leadership, and the primacy of their political organization over their military.<sup>10</sup> Their only military investment was in small arms; however they were more focused on building institutional structures for non-violent struggle and autonomous governance—not the institutions of a group building towards war but of a group building against it.<sup>11</sup> Thus Zapatista organizational culture can be classified as resisters, anchored and static.

This comparison is somewhat contradictory: Hamas is a group known for their attachment to violent strategy, and the EZLN are equally known for their commitment to non-violent strategy. The only instance of EZLN strategic violence was a 12-day conflict with the Mexican military in 1994; though they still maintain their military capabilities, they have not returned to a strategy of armed insurgency since then. Instead, after a brief period of negotiation abetted by civil resistance in the late 1990s, the EZLN has focused on civil resistance exclusively—establishing and managing autonomous governance in Chiapas without any legal basis or permission from the central Mexican government.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gemma van der Haar, “The Zapatista Uprising and the Struggle for Indigenous Autonomy,” *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe / European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 76 (2004): 99–108; Walter D. Mignolo, “The Zapatistas’s Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical, and Political Consequences,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 25, no. 3 (2002): 245–75.

<sup>11</sup> Paulina Villegas, “In a Mexico ‘Tired of Violence,’ Zapatista Rebels Venture Into Politics,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/26/world/americas/mexico-zapatista-subcommander-marcos.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Villegas; Neil Harvey, “The Peace Process in Chiapas: Between Hope and Frustration,” in *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America*, ed. Cynthia Arnson (Stanford University Press, 1999), 129–52; van der Haar, “The Zapatista Uprising and the Struggle for Indigenous Autonomy.”

This strategic path mirror Hamas: they originally used civil resistance before moving to insurgency and then terrorism, while the EZLN originally used insurgency before moving to negotiation and then civil resistance. The important feature of both patterns is they followed social information—the Zapatistas were engaged in constant open democratic conversation with their constituents, who supported non-violence in part due to the spread of liberation theology and the widespread criminal violence in Mexico—and, in moments of acute uncertainty, stayed the strategic course. Mexican politics has experienced several notable upheavals in the last 20 years, and at each critical juncture the EZLN has maintained principled non-violent civil resistance, just as major changes in Palestinian politics has not dissuaded Hamas from consistently using violence, particularly terrorism.<sup>13</sup> Again, organizational culture theory can powerfully explain the patterns of strategic change for insurgent groups, even when their ideological and social makeup is as radically different as Hamas and the Zapatistas.

### *Theoretical Implications*

There are two sets of theoretical implications worth discussing: how this empirical analysis impacts other theories drawn from the case of Palestinian militancy and how this theory affects our collective understanding of militant strategy in the abstract. To start with the former, two major and related issues arise. Not enough attention is paid to the theoretical implications of the Palestinian case as a whole—more attention is usually paid to the Second Intifada than the prior four decades of Palestinian strategy. But the prior decades have more generalizable dynamics because the strategy is

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<sup>13</sup> Villegas, “In a Mexico ‘Tired of Violence,’ Zapatista Rebels Venture Into Politics.”

not as iterated—part of the uniqueness of the Palestinian case is its longevity, and the earlier the analysis, the more generalizable the causes of strategy. As time goes on, strategy becomes entangled in deep iteration that is as dependent on the decades of prior strategy as any extant conditions.

For example, Fatah's move towards negotiation in 1974 comes only 6 years after the victory of armed struggle in Karama, even though the symbolic ethic of Karama survived long past its effect on Fatah's strategy. Theories on negotiation success often focus on ripe conditions for negotiation,<sup>14</sup> which are of course critical, but Fatah shows the importance of organizational culture for negotiation: floating groups will often be more willing and able to negotiate. They are both more able to make unpopular concessions and more attentive to international goals and norms, making them both better negotiating partners and more likely to internally support negotiation. At the same time, floating organizational culture can make for bad government, or at least government unresponsive to the popular mood. Good negotiating partners being bad governors makes for a problematic dilemma that deserves its own treatment outside the scope of this dissertation. Nonetheless, conceptually it shows the importance of a more long-term and holistic analysis of strategy.

As noted, strategy later in the insurgency suffers from the confounding variable of strategic iteration. This is particularly true of the Second Intifada, which has produced reams of scholarship using it as a template to understand other conflicts, especially the

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<sup>14</sup> E.g. Zartman, "Negotiation and the South African Conflict"; William Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (September 2001): 11; Cunningham and Sawyer, "Conflict Negotiations and Rebel Leader Selection"; Richard Jackson, "Successful Negotiation in International Violent Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 3 (2000): 323–43; Asal, Gustafson, and Krause, "It Comes with the Territory."

tactic of suicide bombing and violent escalation.<sup>15</sup> This is not to dismiss the good work done analyzing the Second Intifada, but a warning to take care generalizing from it. The violence and particularly the pattern of escalation in the Second Intifada was produced by a specific set of conditions that rarely if ever obtain elsewhere. The necessary conditions for the Second Intifada were, at least, the long-term occupation, Fatah's repeated failed negotiations and failed civil resistance, Israeli insulation from international pressure, U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, the international post-9/11 mood towards Islam and terrorism, and rapid expansion of the radical Israeli settler movement. Without any one of these conditions, it's unlikely the Second Intifada would have been as long or as radically violent if it happened at all. These conditions are not unique, of course—the post 9/11 attitudes towards terrorism and Islam seem to be recurring in response to Hamas' 10/7 attacks, for example—but this nexus of conditions is rare, and thereby it's difficult to say if the strategies pursued during the Second Intifada or the Palestinian relationship to the tactic of suicide bombing can be generalized to other cases.<sup>16</sup>

Insurgent organizational culture theory has much to offer theoretically beyond what has been shown here. The relationship of organizational culture and material capabilities stands out in particular. Materialists argue for the primacy of material

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing"; David A. Jaeger et al., "Can Militants Use Violence to Win Public Support? Evidence from the Second Intifada," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 3 (2015): 528–49; Nada Matta and René Rojas, "The Second Intifada: A Dual Strategy Arena," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 57, no. 1 (April 2016): 65–113, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975616000035>; James F. Miskel, "The Palestinian Intifada: An Effective Strategy?," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 48–56, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07402775-2005-1004>; Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 343–61.

<sup>16</sup> Abufarha (2009), for example, uses ethnographic research of Palestinian suicide bombers to argue that their suicide bombing was a unique cultural expression of the Palestinian concept of *sumud* or "rootedness" that is strategically distinct from other suicide bombing campaigns built on a strategic logic of compellence. Abufarha, *The Making of a Human Bomb*.

capabilities for explaining strategy, but the Palestinian case shows clearly that the meaning of material capabilities is conditioned on the strategy as much as the inverse. Fatah's military might meant little when it was seen as a way to build negotiation pressure, for example. Their construction of a standing fighting force in Lebanon was much more about building the trappings of state to legitimize itself internationally to rule an incumbent Palestinian state and creating a concession to be traded for that state in negotiations.<sup>17</sup> Another example is Hamas' persistent terrorism: Hamas' material and organizational capabilities suffered greatly for its use of suicide bombing, but they continued anyway because the bombings—and particularly their popularity during the Second Intifada—meant more than their military or even political outcomes.

Organizational culture also explains the persistent missing medium-term goals in many insurgent groups, the Palestinians being one of the most extreme cases. Strategy is less a set of tactics designed to match extant conditions and more an iterative and ever-changing plan for political and military advancement. As strategy iterates, the final goal becomes more amorphous as the causal connections between means and ends become increasingly tenuous; but giving up is not an option for insurgents where surrender means social opprobrium at best and death at worst. So, strategy fumbles forward motivated by the belief that imagined future conditions may favor them—and how best to prepare for or produce those conditions becomes the centerpiece of strategy even though producing those conditions may be impossible with the means available and are unlikely to emerge regardless of strategy. Thus, the PFLP continues throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s to try different approaches to revolution, despite persistent failure, in the hopes that a future

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<sup>17</sup> Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 1997, 453.

mass mobilization will spontaneously arise—not because they are irrational, but because that is the only potential path forward they can see. Fatah and Hamas have similar strategic evolutions, the paths rooted, of course, in their distinct organizational cultures.

### *Policy Implications*

Non-state militant strategy matters enormously for policymakers. Knowing the causes of particular strategies is critical if certain strategies are to be induced—most policymakers would prefer insurgents pursue negotiation than terrorism, for instance. What can insurgent organizational culture teach policymakers about how to produce preferable strategic change in insurgent organizations?

Above all else, this analysis shows the importance of understanding deeper context and establishing an empathetic outlook towards the grievances at the root of an insurgent organization. Once grievances are understood, policymakers can design plans and strategies to offer non-violent paths towards reconciliation. Uncertainty is not good for anyone. For dynamic groups it may make them pursue more violent or radical approaches; static groups will keep doing what they've been doing, which is often not the desired end. Clarity, communication, and meaningful paths to political reconciliation can prevent terrorism and insurgency and limit civil resistance to manageable channels. Most of the Palestinian organizations were unwilling to recognize Israel or accept the terms of a two-state solution—but military failures made many Palestinians, especially Fatah, warm to the idea. Nonetheless Israel persisted in a strategy of elimination against the PLO—even though the terms accepted at Oslo Fatah would have readily agreed to throughout most of the 1980s. The same problem pervades both Intifadas, when Israel treated peaceful activists no different than radical militants, and pro-negotiation leaders

inside Hamas were assassinated even as violence was increasingly the result of loosened organizational control. Trust-building is hard, especially in contexts of long-term mutual violence. But clearly the more effective counter-insurgency strategy would have been presenting potential political routes to a Palestinian state rather than making unilateral demands enforced by military power, which even in the short-term simply made Palestinians more supportive of extreme violence and thereby Hamas more willing to use it. Understanding the sources of Hamas' strategy—that is, social information and the strategic stoicism drawn from rooting their organizational identity in armed struggle—would make clear that deterrence is counterproductive, only convincing Hamas of the necessity of violence. The 10/7 attacks show this clearly—decades of violent interaction with Israel have not led them towards respecting Israeli deterrent posture but rather towards embracing war as a perpetual ethic.

A dynamic explored above also has critical policy implications—the dilemma of embeddedness, negotiation, and governance. In brief, anchored groups make poor negotiating partners but often make better governors while floating groups are the opposite. Clearly Fatah was the only group with which Israel could have secured the Oslo Accords, but it was also patently unable to manage Palestinian domestic politics due to its undemocratic posture and resultant lack of persistent popular legitimacy. What support Fatah and the Palestinian Authority enjoyed was shallow, revealed as such the moment it collapsed after 2000. This teaches the same lessons outlined above: anchored groups are simultaneously the best hope for a permanent political solution and the worst nightmare as a perpetual enemy. Avoiding ethos of conflict by limiting or carefully targeting violence and encouraging (rather than assassinating) internal anti-violence proponents

helps. But above all else: violence against civilians produces a pro-violence contingency among those civilians which anchored groups will feel obligated to obey. Partnering with anchored groups and increasing their legitimacy by working earnestly to redress their grievances is the best way to preserve long-term stability. Partnering with floating groups like Fatah is often only a temporary solution, as they struggle to preserve legitimacy and usually lack a plan to fix social and economic issues that are sure to arise.

### *Future Research*

This dissertation has focused on developing a theory of insurgent organizational culture and showing its utility in explaining insurgent strategy. The perspective here is in response to the dearth of scholarship investigating how strategic preferences are constituted in insurgents, instead taking them as exogenously given. Having shown that it is possible to explore the constitution of insurgent organizations and that this process influences strategy, the previously listed implications crystallize in three areas for future study.

First, as was briefly attempted above, this theory should be tested in other cases and across contexts. The intention of formulating a theory and testing it in a most likely case, such as the Palestinian case for insurgent organizational culture, is to then test it in harder cases. The strength of organizational culture's effect likely varies significantly with the length of an insurgency—longer insurgencies with more iteration will be more deeply affected by culture. Exploring the effect of time and iteration on the explanatory power of organizational culture is one potential path forwards to further understanding patterns of strategic change in insurgent groups.

Second, much work on insurgent strategy focuses on the causes or effects of particular strategies. This dissertation took a holistic view to explore the broad strokes of strategic change as driven by organizational culture; a logical next step is exploring the relationship of culture to individual strategies. For example, it seems logical that reasonable organizations like Fatah will naturally tend towards negotiation, since on average the international community prefers negotiated settlements and dynamic groups are more willing to change strategies in response to this information. This requires more study, ideally comparing reasonable groups across contexts and how their attitudes towards negotiation change over time.

Third, though unexplored in this study, factions within organizations are common and can often produce splinters, such as the PFLP splintering into the DFLP and the PFLP-GC, Fatah's defectors in the 1980s, and the inside-outside leadership divide within Hamas throughout the 1990s. Do these splinters constitute subcultures, and are internal culture divides an explanation for organizational splintering? A deeper investigation into internal factional conflict in insurgent groups and the contestation of strategic ideas in which these conflicts are rooted can not only add to the literature on splinter groups but also help to elucidate the process of preference constitution during organizational formation. Factional disputes are often contesting strategic ideas, and these conflicts may be essential to constituting an organizational culture or deepening its unity in an organization.

More generally, this study represents a hope that research on insurgent strategy can move past rationalist ontology. A culture-based approach has much to offer especially in understanding long insurgencies, which are often the most difficult to

resolve and the deadliest. Moving forward a research agenda that marries constructivist and rationalist theories can, hopefully, give the field a more complete understanding of why insurgents do what they do—and in so doing, deepen empirical understanding of particular (and particularly difficult) conflicts.

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