

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

It is important to understand how Palestinian views have changed over the years. Keep in mind two points as you read this section and those that follow. First, people respond to the circumstances in which they live. If you are rich, you see problems one way; if you are unemployed, you see them a second way; if you own a small shop or farm the land, you see them a third and fourth way. Similarly, opinions among members of the same national or ethnic group may vary for other reasons, including gender, age and education. We must understand the circumstances in which Palestinians (and Israelis) live if we are to understand their positions and actions as individuals and as members of groups.

Second, there are at least eight million Palestinians—in Israel, the occupied territories and abroad. Palestinians are the largest refugee group in the world—one in three refugees is Palestinian. Like Americans, Mexicans, Canadians and Israelis, they disagree on political issues. They also change their minds as new circumstances develop. It is a mistake to think Palestinians have a common view that remains unchanged. As we will see, their views have changed considerably over the years.

In the immediate aftermath of 1948, Palestinians took two different paths. One group, under a leader named Amin Husseini, called for the end of partition and the creation of a secular state in all of Palestine that would include Muslims, Jews, and Christians. A second group, led mainly by Palestinian elites living in exile in Jordan, agreed to unite the West Bank and East Jerusalem with Jordan to form one country under Jordanian leadership. Many Palestinians were so angry at Jordan's apparent attempt to grab their land that they came to view Jordan as an enemy almost as much as Israel. No Arab state recognized the unification with Jordan as a permanent solution, nor did the US. By the early 1950's, however, Palestinian leaders seemed ineffective and unable to speak for their people.

The Arab League established the PLO in 1964 in an effort to control Palestinian nationalism while appearing to champion their cause. Although it was supposed to represent the Palestinians, the PLO really represented the views of President Nasser of Egypt. Its first leader, Ahmad Shuqairi, made wild and irresponsible threats to drive Israelis into the sea. He had little support among Palestinians for he was seen as a puppet of the Egyptians. In fact, early PLO leaders were selected by the Arab League based on their commitment to containing radical nationalism and limiting guerilla activity against Israel. Leaders of the Arab states sought to expand Arab unity and build up stronger military forces so as to better negotiate with Israel. Some Palestinians, however, refused to wait for Arab unity and military strength, and tried instead to stimulate popular support in the region for a war of liberation.

In the 1960s Palestinian students began to form their own organizations independent of control by Arab governments (although the Syrians, Libyans, and Iraqis continued to fund and control particular groups). From 1965-1967 Yasser Arafat's group, *Fatah*, abstained from joining the PLO and chose instead to conduct guerilla raids into Israel from neighboring Arab states. These activities proved so popular among Palestinians that groups within the PLO soon began to organize paramilitary activities, and younger, more militant Palestinians began to take over the PLO.

After 1967 Egypt, Syria and Jordan suffered serious domestic and regional embarrassment because of their military defeat at the hands of Israel, and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. At a time when Arab states and citizens felt so powerless against Israel, the PLO achieved regional popularity for its paramilitary efforts to 'liberate' Palestine. PLO guerilla raids into Israel from neighboring Arab states, however, destabilized the region, brought negative international attention to host countries, and credible threats of Israeli reprisal. For these reasons the Arab states often arrested PLO activists, and generally sought to redirect the PLO into diplomatic channels.

The PLO includes different political and armed groups with varying ideological orientations. Yasser Arafat is the leader of Fatah, the largest group, and has been PLO chairman since 1968. However, neither he nor Fatah can 'control' other groups in the PLO. The other major groups are the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and, in the occupied territories, the Palestine Peoples Party (PPP, formerly the Communist Party). Over time, these factions have differed sharply in their relative support for violence versus negotiations, and what sort of outcome to the conflict they were willing to accept. Although Fatah first emerged as an organization promoting guerilla incursions into Israel, it soon moved into the mainstream as other, more radical groups, began to undertake hijackings and assassinations outside of Israel and the occupied territories. These acts, especially the taking of hostages at the 1972 Munich Games, resulted in substantial international shock and anger.

Arafat, seeking to maintain PLO unity and international respectability, had to try to limit these terrorist activities and maintain some sort of control over the movement. Arafat was often successful in keeping these factions together around a more moderate approach supported by Fatah, but not always. As we will see, sometimes more extreme factions succeeded in dragging the PLO away from a moderate position. Arafat had a difficult balancing act: to keep the factions together, Arafat could not appear too moderate. To win broad international support, however, Arafat had to become more moderate. Despite factional differences, the majority of Palestinians still regard the PLO as their representative.

In the 1960s, the PLO's primary base of operations was Jordan. In 1970 a brutal attack by the Jordanian army drove the PLO leadership out of the country, forcing it to relocate to Lebanon. When the Lebanese civil war started in 1975, the PLO became a party to the conflict. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the PLO leadership was expelled from the country, relocating once more to Tunisia. It is important to note that until 1994, the PLO leadership in exile was focused on advancing Palestinian goals from the 'outside' through international diplomatic and military activities, while Palestinians on the 'inside', or in the occupied territories, often faced rather different issues. Although the majority of Palestinians on the 'inside' always supported the PLO, they would demonstrate a certain independence from the PLO leadership in Tunis during the intifada, beginning in 1987.

The 1968 PLO charter considered the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel illegal (Document 6). Arafat's efforts toward moderation, and apparent willingness to negotiate with Israelis, contributed to the PLO's diplomatic successes, most notably when the PLO gained observer status at the UN in 1974 after Arafat's speech (Documents 7, 8). From the 1970s to the 1980s, the PLO engaged in military and diplomatic activities with the goal of creating a secular democratic state for Jews, Christians and Muslims in all of former Palestine (Document 9).

As it gained recognition at the UN, the PLO lost the possibility for recognition by the US. In 1975, in order to extract concessions from Israel to Egypt regarding removal of Israeli forces from the Sinai, the US promised Israel not to recognize the PLO until it explicitly accepted UN resolution 242 and recognized Israel's right to exist. This created serious problems for PLO diplomacy: if the US, the major peace broker in the Middle East, refused to associate with the PLO, then the PLO was excluded from important negotiations, most notably Camp David I.

Although many Palestinians, including some PLO leaders, had said for several years that they accepted a 'two-state' solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it was not until 1988 that a clear official PLO declaration was made. At this important meeting in Algiers, the Palestine National Council accepted the partition of Palestine, accepted Israel as a permanent and legitimate state, and renounced terrorism.

From 1948 until 1993, Israel did not acknowledge Palestinian national rights or recognize the Palestinians as an independent party to the conflict. Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO, arguing that it was nothing but a terrorist organization, and insisted on dealing only with Jordan or other Arab states. It rejected the establishment of a Palestinian state, insisting that Palestinians should be incorporated into existing Arab states. This intransigence ended when Israeli representatives entered into secret negotiations with the PLO, which led to the Oslo Declaration of Principles.

There have been three main Palestinian opponents to Yasser Arafat's PLO:

1. On the left various socialist groups think Arafat is too close to business and banking interests, and too willing to negotiate with Israel and cooperate with the US. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is one of these. It is led by George Habash, a Christian doctor. The PFLP left the PLO Executive Committee in 1974 and rejoined it in 1981. It opposes negotiations with Israel.
2. On the right some Islamist groups feel that the PLO is too willing to cooperate with socialists and is too willing to negotiate with Israel. They feel there should be a united Palestine where Jews could live, but which would not be governed by Jews. The largest of these groups is called *Harakat Al-Mouqawama Al-Islamiyya* (Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement). 'Hamas' is an acronym meaning 'enthusiasm' or 'zeal'.
3. Several Palestinian radicals maintain their own military organizations. Abu Nidal was one of these. He bitterly and violently opposed the PLO for what he considered its moderate positions. He carried out airplane bombings and attacks on civilians and tried to assassinate Arafat. He opposed any negotiation with Israel, and was probably funded by Iraq. Abu Nidal died in Iraq in August 2003. Iraqi officials claimed he committed suicide, but Abu Nidal's supporters say the Iraqis killed him.