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Projections for the Palestinian Revolution

By Dave Eisenbach

Autonomy Equals Revolution

The establishment of an autonomous Palestinian state in the West Bank is not in the true interest of the Palestinian people. Those who think immediate autonomy would be another step toward a new and improved world order disregard the history of almost every revolution from 1789 to 1989. The history of Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan indicates that if the Palestinians remain patient, within 20 years, they will peacefully assume control of a democratic government with an established bureaucracy, legal system, and economy.

"Land for Peace" is a catchy phrase, but it is also a dangerous over-simplification which ignores political reality and historical trends. Israel's refusal to allow truly democratic elections and political freedoms has prevented Palestine from establishing a democratic tradition. Given the political oppression and violence of the last 25-year Israeli occupation, military and political withdrawal would be equivalent to the overthrow of an authoritarian or totalitarian system. Two centuries of history show that after the initial revolutionary euphoria wears off, the united revolutionary opposition (i.e. the Third Estate, Solidarity, and perhaps the PLO) splinters into conflicting groups that struggle to fill the power vacuum. Revolutionary states without democratic traditions slip into

anarchy, civil war, and/or tyranny as in the cases of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century French governments. Even if the Palestinians were to establish a democratic government immediately after their autonomy was granted, the lack of a democratic tradition would make them susceptible to the same civil strife and tyranny that undermined the Weimar Republic.

United They Seem, Divided They Are

After withdrawal, the PLO would not assume power as a united coalition government. The history and structure of the PLO shows that it is not a team of players shooting at the same goal. The PLO is essentially a cartel of various self-interested groups united to increase their own power. The guerrilla groups, which formed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, did not receive much attention and support from Palestinians until after the 1967 June War. During the war, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan not only failed to liberate Palestine, but also surrendered the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights. Palestinians attributed these humiliating losses to the incompetence of the Arab armies and to the Arab states' lack of concern for the Palestinian people. Consequently, many Palestinians joined guerrilla groups, such as the original Palestine Liberation Organization, which was a puppet of Nasser, and Fateh, an independent guerrilla group led by Yassir Arafat (Cobban41) By 1969, most Palestinian military, political, economic, and social organizations saw that the only way to achieve their one common goal was to set aside their ideological conflicts and form an "umbrella organization" called the PLO. (Goldschmit 406)

The PLO is a diverse coalition of eight parties, movements and guerrilla groups, each with different leaders, ideologies, and agendas. Most of the groups in the PLO espouse one of three programs. One type calls for the unification of all Arab states and the subsequent use of a united Arab army to liberate Palestine. This ideology was adopted by the Arab Nationalist Movement, the precursor to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) led by George Habbash. A second type concentrates strictly on the liberation of Palestine. This limited commitment has been espoused by Yassir Arafat and his Fateh movement. The third type of group carries out whatever policies their state sponsors dictate, as in the case of the Iraqi-sponsored Arab Liberation Front, Lybia's Popular Palestinian Liberation Front, and the Syrian-supported Vanguardians of the popular War of Liberation, commonly known as Saiqa.

The PLO constitution reveals the tenuous relationship between its members. Since the various organizations of the PLO espouse conflicting ideologies, the PLO's institutions and policies must reflect the ideologies and needs of all groups. The PLO's constitution rests "the supreme authority" of the PLO in the popularly elected 400 member Palestinian National Council (PNC). The PNC's members are chosen by an informal process of negotiation between the eight member groups because elections would be impossible to hold among a population in diaspora and under occupation. (Long 294) This process ensures that the PNC represents all ideologies. The PNC elects an Executive Committee to determine the

FLO's policies. The Executive Committee adopts policies based on consensus among all factions of the PLO. This decision-making process gives a disproportionate influence to smaller, radical groups who have been able to prevent the PLO from enacting conciliatory policies. (Long 294) The Executive committee must please all groups, or risk the dissolution of the entire organization.

The threat of the PLO's disintegration over an ideological dispute is very real. In 1968, a faction of the PFLP split from its parent group and formed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. In 1969, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine led by Nayif Hawatmeh also broke away from the PFLP. Power struggles have also splintered Yasir Arafat's organization, Fateh. In 1970, Keta'ib an-Nasr and his Victory Battalions split from Arafat. Since 1974, Iraq has supported Abu Nidal and his faction's struggle for control over Fateh. In 1976, a Syrian-supported renegade group, Revolutionary Fateh, unsuccessfully challenged Arafat's leadership.

By the early 1970s, all member groups of the PLO belonged to either of two ideological divisions. The mainstream group concentrated more on diplomacy, while the Rejection Front was more militant. In 1983 the PLO split into three factions. One set of members supported Arafat's pursuit of a diplomatic solution. The second group, the National Salvation Alliance, opposed Arafat's diplomacy. The third, the Democratic Alliance, supported Arafat on most policies except his close ties with the pro-West regimes of Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.

The various groups of the PLO often pursue their own interests at the expense of the whole organization. For

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example, in 1970, the PFLP defied the Palestinian National Council and committed a series of hijackings and bombings. The terrorist acts of the PFLP drew the entire PLO into a savage war with Jordan that killed 3,000 Palestinians and almost eliminated the entire PLO. On 20 June 1990, a militant faction of the PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Front, attacked an Israeli beach. The attack was a military failure, but it achieved its political goal of disrupting negotiations between Arafat and the United States. Although the Executive Committee of the PLO condemned the PFLP's renegade actions, the Bush Administration broke off discussion with the entire PLO. The history and composition of the PLO indicates that once Israel's reign over the West Bank and Gaza Strip ends, this umbrella organization will fold and its various factions will fight for power.

Although the largest, best-armed factions of the PLO would be the main competitors for power, several other movements and groups will also compete. The Intifada has seen the emergence of new movements inside the occupied

territories. Members of popular committees and mayors, who were responsible for distributing food, collecting garbage, and maintaining morale during curfews, have acquired the support of many Palestinians who resent the PLO leaders and their Tunisian seaside villas. Another source of competition would come from the militant Islamic fundamentalist group, Hamas. The past fractiousness of the PLO and the emergence of new challengers for power in the occupied territories indicate that

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if the Israelis withdrew without having first engendered a democratic tradition, they would not spawn democracy and liberty in the territories. Instead, a premature withdrawal would leave a power vacuum, along with several unrestrained and armed organizations with a desire to fill that vacuum. Autonomy would condemn the Palestinian people to a civil war. Thus, Palestinian autonomy would, like most revolutions, eat its own children.

Palestine Is Not Jordan... But It Will Be

The strong historical ethnic, economic, and religious ties between Palestine and Jordan indicate that a Palestinian-controlled democratic state will inevitably replace the Jordanian monarchy. Jordan and Palestine were the results of the 1916 secret Sykes-Picot agreement between Great Britain and France in which the two countries agreed that the British would control the area between the Egyptian border and eastern Arabia. The British chose this area, which later became Transjordan, because it provided a secure passage to India. An enclave around Jaffa and Jerusalem was to be formed and administered by an international government because Russia wanted to help administer the Holy Land. This arbitrary enclave became Palestine and Israel. The great powers established the borders according to their own interest and ignored the ethnic, historical, religious, and linguistic ties between the Palestinian and Transjordanian peoples. King Abdullah of Transjordan probably considered these ties when he seized Eastern Palestine, the West Bank of the Jordan River, in 1948 and annexed it in 1950.

The 400,000 West Bank Palestinians and the 480,000 Palestinian refugees that were added to Transjordan's 400,000 inhabitants in 1948 have greatly affected Jordan's political system. (Sahliyah 10) Abdullah's need for the cooperation and loyalty of the Palestinians inspired him to grant them full Jordanian citizenship with equal political, educational, and economic rights. (Long 226) On 20 July, 1951 a Palestinian nationalist murdered Abdullah. A predominantly East Bank Bedouin Army under the guidance of British officers guaranteed the succession of Abdullah's son Talal, but Talal's mental instability weakened the monarchy's influence over the West Bank. In order to retain its power, the monarchy promulgated a new constitution in 1952 which gave the West Bank

Palestinians the right to participate in Jordanian politics. The constitution established a bicameral legislature. The lower house, the House of Representatives, would be elected by popular vote in three East Bank Bedouin districts, seven regular East Bank districts, and seven districts on the West Bank. (Long 230) This designation of districts ensured that East Bank representatives, who were assumed to be loyal monarchists, always had a majority. However, the monarchy still retained ultimate authority over government policy. The superficial political reforms appeased Jordan's potentially-rebellious public. Thus, the new constitution enabled the monarchy to survive the year-long transition from Talal, whose successors forced him to abdicate in January, 1952, to

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a regency council, and finally to Talal's young son Hussein, who assumed the throne in 1953. (Long 226)

Not even Israel's military occupation since 1967 has demolished the economic, political, religious, and ethnic bridges between East and West Bank. Hussein's desire to appeal to the West Bank Palestinians, in the hope of future reunification, has affected Jordan's political policies and institutions. Despite the disapproval of every Arab state, Hussein maintained a working relationship with Israel in order to influence West Bank politics. Hussein used his grandfather's practice of gaining loyalty through charity. With Israel's permission, Jordan gained indirect influence over the West Bank by giving consumer goods to the governors and mayors. These officials then traded these goods for loyalty, and thereby controlled the West Bank. Jordan's economic influence and the PLO's ideological inspiration dominated West Bank politics until the late 1970s, when the Likud government's Village Leagues and repressive activities began to radicalize nationalist and Islamic movements, like the Hamas. The importance that the Palestinian's placed on goods and international terrorism declined, while the role of religious and local resistance leaders in daily life increased. The Jordanian-sponsored mayors became more influential during the Intifada because they organized the National Guidance Council and coordinated popular resistance.

Hussein altered Jordan's political institutions in order to maintain the possibility of reunifying the East Bank and West Bank. During the early days of the Israeli occupation, West Bank districts were allocated seats in the Jordanian parliament. In 1974, the Arab States recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people at the Rabat conference. Hussein would not cease allocating seats to the West Bank, thereby recognizing the PLO's authority over the

West Bank. Instead he dissolved the entire parliament and ended Jordan's semblance of democracy. In 1983, Hussein used a new constitution to increase his influence in the West Bank. The West Bank was allocated seats which were filled by a vote of a new Parliament chosen by East Bankers. The new parliament, however, has not held influence over the West Bank, which has been controlled by local mayors and the PLO. (Long 231) Clearly, the political history of Jordan and Palestine are so strong that their political futures will be interwoven.

The true interest of the Palestinians is to establish a genuine democracy without suffering through a civil war. The establishment of an autonomous Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip would condemn the Palestinians to a civil war which could plunge the entire region into war. A Palestinian democracy is possible, provided the region is not disturbed by war. After Hussein dies, there will be a crisis of legitimacy, similar to the one which beset the monarchy after Abdullah's assassination. In order to maintain the legitimacy of the monarchy, Hasan, Hussein's successor, will promulgate a new constitution to establish more democratic freedoms and rights, as in 1952 under Abdullah's successor Talal. This time, however, the king will not be able to subvert or abrogate the constitution because his people will demand political control. Since Jordan's economic woes will indubitably continue throughout this century, Hasan won't be able to buy the loyalty of his constituents, as Abdullah and Hussein had aptly done. Thus, within the next 20 years, a Palestinian majority will elect Palestinian official who will assert control over a nominally Jordanian state. Jordan will be Palestine.

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