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Palestinian Armed Struggle: Means and Ends

Yezid Sayigh*

At the end of August 1982, after a two-month siege by the Israeli army (IDF), between ten and twelve thousand members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—fighters, support personnel, and the entire leadership—were evacuated by land and sea from the Lebanese capital, Beirut.¹ The headquarters of both the PLO and the mainstream guerrilla organization, Fateh, were transferred to Tunis, and the evacuated fighters were distributed among eight Arab countries.

Through this dispersal, the PLO lost two major assets which it had painstakingly developed since the Lebanese civil war of 1975–76 and the accompanying test of force with Syria. The first was the quasi-autonomous political power base which the PLO had constructed for itself in Beirut and south Lebanon in the absence of a strong, widely-accepted central government. Initially, the PLO had “shared” influence in western Lebanon with the Syrian-manned Arab Deterrent Force, but following the withdrawal of all but symbolic Syrian forces from coastal Lebanon in early 1980, it was the PLO that emerged as the final political-military arbiter in that part of the country (which included three of the four major cities—Beirut, Tyre, and Sidon).² This base provided the PLO with a critical margin of freedom from Arab, and particularly Syr탄, pressure as it pursued its diplomatic strategy, and gave it an “address” for visiting foreign delegations.³

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Another asset lost was the integrated military complex maintained by the PLO throughout its area of control. The PLO enjoyed not only combat presence and administrative/logistical infrastructure but also geographical continuity internally, proximity to Israel externally, and the political and practical option of undertaking military action. Not that there were no obstacles to such action: in 1977, renegade Lebanese forces (under Major Sa'd Haddad) loyal to Israel occupied a strip of land along much of the southern border, which was expanded following the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon in March 1978. At the same time, United Nations forces (UNIFIL) occupied additional territory to the north. Thus, the entire border zone, to a depth of six kilometers in the east to twenty-four kilometers in the west, was transformed into a buffer zone preventing contiguity between the PLO and the IDF in all but one eight-kilometer-wide sector facing the Beaufort Castle. In addition, the PLO could always be subjected to a partial or total blockade imposed by Israeli gunboats and/or Syrian forces. A total blockade on arms supplies by both armies was enforced in the summer of 1976. The Israelis also hindered fuel shipments, while the Syrians imposed a partial food blockade.

Despite such handicaps, between 1977 and 1982 the PLO in Lebanon continued to receive arms shipments by sea or overland in normal circumstances, and was able to attack Israel by directing artillery fire over the border strip or by sending guerrillas who were able to pass undetected through it. Thus, the PLO retained a credible option of initiating military action when and in the form it deemed necessary politically, as shown by the raid on the Tel Aviv-Haifa highway in March 1978 or the two-week artillery exchange across the Lebanese border in July 1981.

With the mass evacuation from Beirut and the occupation of the southern half of the country by Israel, the Palestinian military base in Lebanon was completely dismantled, thus confronting the PLO with a radically changed situation. Whereas before June 1982 its forces had been concentrated in Lebanon, by the end of 1982 roughly half of its manpower had been dispersed throughout Algeria, Tunisia, the Sudan, Yemen, and Iraq—countries and seas away from Israel. Previously, most PLO men had been based outside Syrian-dominated areas, but now several thousand men were in east and north Lebanon and in Syria itself, subject to the direct control of the Syrian army and intelligence service. This dispersal and division of forces laid the foundation for the subsequent split within Fateh and the PLO in the spring of 1983, and for the whole pattern of subsequent Palestinian military and diplomatic activity.
In the aftermath of the evacuation from Beirut, bitter recriminations were voiced within the PLO concerning responsibility for the abysmal performance of certain units and commanders during the 1982 fighting in the south. The promotion to senior positions of two incompetent officers was the catalyst for widespread protest, helping destroy the last defenses against demoralization and dissent among Palestinian forces. However, what had weakened morale most fundamentally were the lack of a governing strategy and the absence of military leadership. Concerning the first, the PLO failed to articulate a new politico-military strategy in the wake of the 1982 war, causing a general feeling of disorientation and aimlessness. Concerning the second, the September 1982 assassination in Syrian-controlled territory of PLO Chief-of-Staff Brigadier Sa'd Sayil severed the command structure’s main link with its forces in Lebanon, the one remaining battlefront with Israel. Other PLO leaders were prevented from entering Lebanon according to the terms of the agreement governing the evacuation from Beirut and therefore could not take Sayil’s place. Daily contact by wireless or meetings in Damascus—always dependent on Syrian goodwill—proved insufficient to fill the resulting leadership vacuum. Not only was Syrian goodwill not forthcoming but it was replaced by their active agitation among the Palestinian forces against the PLO leadership. By the spring of 1983, the stage was set for the split in Fateh, the mini-civil war in Tripoli that followed at the end of 1983, and the final evacuation of the PLO leadership and its “loyalists” from Lebanon.

Thus, the most important result of the events of 1982 and 1983 was the effective division of the Palestinian national resistance movement (PRM) into two distinct camps: the PLO, still enjoying some political and institutional independence by virtue of being in Arab exile, but geographically distanced from Israel; and the opposition, closer to the battlefield but lacking form and cohesion and subject to Syrian will. Each party has been propelled by its own physical and practical circumstances to seek alternative military methods to serve its political strategy. The PLO leadership, used to fielding heavy weaponry in south Lebanon but unable to do so anymore, has resorted to sending naval squads across hundreds of miles of sea to attack Israel, to recruiting secret members in the occupied territories, or infiltrating Lebanon’s refugee-camps. Conversely, the opposition, though fielding substantial forces in Lebanon, has operated only minimally against Israel. In fairness, the opposition has been unable to do more because it has been subject to Syrian control; however, its units did little against the occupying IDF in Lebanon, even when they enjoyed a certain freedom of action in 1983. The opposition forces have shown the same predilection for
heavy weaponry as the PLO mainstream, and as a result the tendency has been not to engage in combat unless tanks and artillery could safely be deployed. Thus these forces have seen action against Arab foes more often than against the nearby Israelis.

**Palestinian Objectives**

The overall political objectives of Palestinian military action have evolved considerably over the past twenty years. There has been a gradual shift from "total" objectives to far more limited "phased" ones, from the "ideal" to the "realistic." In 1965, the ideal was presented as the goal: liberation of the whole of Palestine through armed struggle and the establishment of a democratic, secular state for Arabs and Jews. In 1974, the realistic gained sway: the establishment of a "national authority" in part of Palestine, following successful negotiations and recognition of the existence of Israel.\(^8\) Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, the PRM's ultimate aims became more modest as it grew in size and capabilities. From a mere handful of fugitive guerrillas armed with rusty guns in 1965, the PRM expanded into a small army fielding artillery and armor, backed by social, economic, and administrative institutions enjoying political legitimacy and international recognition.

While there have been obvious changes in the PRM's ultimate political aims over the years, two political and psychological objectives of a more practical nature have remained constant since 1965, when Palestinian guerrilla action against Israel was officially launched by Fateh. Both objectives reflect the unique circumstances of the far-flung physical dispersal of the Palestinian people and their subjection to the political and security controls of various host governments.\(^9\)

The first and most important of these objectives has been to restore a sense of national identity.\(^10\) This was presented by Fateh as a prerequisite to any advancement of the Palestinian cause, even before it initiated armed action. The second has been to place the Palestinians on the international political map. Although this objective was not seen as a prerequisite to launching mass-based, armed resistance in 1965, by 1968 it was viewed as a necessary step for consolidating the advances already made. The successful bid by Fateh and the other guerrilla groups to take over the PLO in 1968–69 reflected the wish to translate Palestinian sacrifices into political gains, gains that could only be articulated and then expanded by a central, representative institution.\(^11\)
It is noteworthy that in the 1967–73 period, Palestinian armed action was characterized more by a stubborn persistence than by effectiveness and efficiency in military terms. Indeed, as the number of guerrilla operations and casualties rose, Israeli losses dwindled. Yet the mere fact of independent Palestinian armed action that would not disappear, regardless of arithmetic calculations of losses and efficiency, created two political facts. Through their perseverance, the Palestinians both regained their sense of national identity (and with it the specific recognition of the PRM/PLO as the embodiment of that identity) and reasserted their existence internationally.

As these objectives were achieved, two new developments brought about a subtle shift in the PRM’s ultimate political aims. The first was the PLO’s expulsion from Jordan in 1970–71 and the widespread political disorientation and demoralization that followed in its wake. The second was the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent Arab and international recognition of the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinians.

The period between the two events is of crucial importance, as it was then that the foundations were laid for the pattern and logic of all subsequent political, diplomatic, and military action.

In mid-July 1971, the Jordanian army terminated a ten-month campaign with a final sweep against Palestinian bases in the ‘Ajlun Mountains and the Jordan Valley. In this, the PRM/PLO’s first major exodus, some 1,500 guerrillas out of an original contingent of 2,500–3,000 were expelled to Syria. With this expulsion, the entire episode of independent, Palestinian armed action in Jordan came to an end. During the army’s campaign, the guerrilla movement lost hundreds of men in battle, while similar numbers, demoralized, subsequently left the ranks. Most importantly, however, the PLO had lost its main independent base. With the largest Palestinian community in the diaspora, the longest frontier with Israel, and open bridges to the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Jordan offered an ideal support base for both clandestine and guerrilla action within the occupied territories.

About the same time the PLO lost its Jordanian base, developments were occurring in Syria and Lebanon, the other two “confrontation states” which hosted the guerrilla movement, that gradually led to a near-total suspension of cross-border activity against Israel. In Syria, the coup d’état bringing Hafiz al-Asad to power in November 1970, by disrupting the multifactional internal balance, significantly affected the guerrillas’ position there. The new government quickly imposed strict security measures and
made a bid for influence within the Palestinian movement. This led to a drastic curtailment of the latter's freedom of action in Syria, and to the gradual exodus of its combat manpower to Lebanon between 1971 and 1973.

Meanwhile, in Lebanon, the September 1970 presidential elections brought in a "law and order" president, Sulayman Franjihah, who favored seriously limiting the Palestinian armed presence. Israel soon adopted a policy of "active defense" in south Lebanon, carrying out a series of commando assaults and air raids, followed, in 1972, by two large search-and-destroy ground operations. Israeli counterguerrilla action contributed to the internal tension in Lebanon, leading in May 1973 to a "rehearsal" civil war and to an imposition of military restrictions and a suspension of guerrilla activity against Israel from south Lebanon.

Unable to provide effective responses to the loss of secure bases and open borders, and unable to develop quickly an alternative politico-military strategy, the Palestinian guerrilla movement entered a difficult period. Politically, it became vulnerable to internal dissension and to external attempts at subordination and strategic containment. Militarily, it suffered from near-total lethargy, as it could regain neither the tactical nor the strategic initiative. At the same time, despite official reconfirmation of the principle of armed struggle and of its accompanying tenets, such politico-military concepts as "guerrilla warfare" and "people's war" were effectively discarded. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership, conscious of its weakness and vulnerability, was forced to seek sources of strength alternative to the "masses." From these feelings of impotence ('azj) evolved the options of the post-October 1973 period.

In the interim, however, the Palestinian leadership resorted to several military measures in order to maintain internal discipline and reassert itself regionally. One was a process of "regularization" of Palestinian combat forces (tajyish). Another was a brief flirtation with "terrorist" tactics. Coinciding with the shift to south Lebanon and certain organizational changes within the political networks, the first measure was designed to mold the guerrillas into a manageable, politically dependable force. The second was meant to absorb the anger and bitterness of the Palestinian rank and file and to remind the external actors of the PRM's continued presence and vitality, while disguising its real predicament.\(^\text{18}\)

This transitional period in the PRM's history was not to end until October 1973, when the Arab-Israeli war presented the Palestinian leadership with the new strategic options exemplified in the October 1974 Arab summit decision recognizing the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative
of the Palestinians, and by Yasir Arafat's invitation to address the United Nations General Assembly the following month. The PLO was faced with a dilemma. If it were to enter the Arab and international systems, thereby protecting its physical security, it would have to renounce its "revolutionary" character and accept the legitimacy of the existing Arab order. Similarly, the hope of achieving some territorial gains within the Arab and international systems implied a scaling down of Palestinian demands. The choice facing the PRM, then, was either to maintain maximal goals, requiring a level of military, infrastructural, social, and economic strength it had not come close to enjoying even at its peak in the 1968–70 period, or to adopt the minimal goals that could be achieved through international diplomacy. Given the PRM/PLO's weakness and the prospect of further defeats at Arab hands, it opted for the second course.

Thus, since 1974, Palestinian mainstream activity has been geared towards achieving three main goals: the preservation of Palestinian identity, the preservation of a Palestinian international presence, and the establishment of a Palestinian national authority in part of Palestine. The movement's success has been in the first two aims, which remain important insofar as they are prerequisites to the third. Indeed, one can say that they have already led to the emergence of a Palestinian "entity" in the metaphysical sense of the term, in the absence of a more concrete embodiment in the form of a sovereign state. This in turn highlights the importance of the PLO itself. Between 1974 and 1982, it had developed from a state-in-a-suitcase and had succeeded in setting up a rudimentary state-in-exile in its Lebanese refuge. By institutionalizing the Palestinian cause and providing political representation, the PLO formed a bridge between the metaphysical entity of national identity and the physical entity of a national authority.

Military Means and Political Ends

Between 1974 and 1982, the uses of the Palestinian military instrument reflected the PLO leadership's three main objectives at a practical level. The first of these immediate goals, without which pursuit of the larger ones would not be possible, was self-defense: the PLO felt it needed sufficient military strength to defend its main headquarters in Beirut, primarily against Lebanese official or paramilitary agencies. (When it came to defense against stronger forces, such as the Syrians, the PLO hoped that its regional political umbrella would compensate for its own weakness.) The second was the preservation of the PLO's political status, the need to safeguard the
progress it had made both internationally and within the Arab and Palestinian arenas in gaining political recognition. Third was inducing movement towards resolving the Palestinian problem through a weakening of Israeli political will. In the PLO's view, a military capability was needed to persuade the Americans, and ultimately the Israelis, that there would be no end to armed conflict and political instability until they had made territorial concessions (after having first recognized the PLO).

In pursuit of these three more immediate objectives, Palestinian military action took several different forms. In the area of self-defense, the PLO opted for the maintenance of a full-time, semiregular force that could decide the battle quickly by virtue of its ability to concentrate and employ heavy firepower. In its view, the mere presence of such a force would have, thanks to its visibility, a deterrent effect lacking in the small, low-profile guerrilla units. This outlook developed as a result of clashes with various Lebanese factions and from the experience of July 1981, when it was PLO artillery shelling of Israeli settlements in retaliation for Israeli bombing of Beirut that finally induced the IDF to accept a joint cease-fire. Not that there was not an enormous disparity of strength between the PLO and IDF, but the PLO's ability to inflict an unacceptable (though not massive) level of dislocation in northern Israel or casualties in the IDF helped deter the IDF from invading Lebanon at will. Just as important, the PLO came to see its artillery, and more generally its semiregular military institutional base in Lebanon, as a major bargaining asset to be negotiated in the context of a broad political settlement.

The second of the shorter-term objectives—defense of the PLO's political status—was pursued through two other forms of military action, principally involving small forces. The first was that of dramatic raids carried out inside Israel by suicide squads from Lebanon, in which large numbers of Israelis were taken hostage or killed. The most important of these, in 1974, 1975, and 1978, coincided with ongoing diplomatic contacts from which the PLO had been excluded. The PLO's purpose in carrying out such actions was to remind other parties of its presence and to indicate both its rejection of specific suggestions and its intention to subvert any initiatives depriving it of a role. PLO operations could even derail or delay specific initiatives by starting a chain of events that would restore the state of tension in the area, as was the case in March 1978, when the IDF invaded south Lebanon in supposed retaliation for a Palestinian raid on the Tel Aviv-Haifa highway, thereby stalling Egyptian-Israeli peace talks for several months. This type of military operation also served to boost morale
in the diaspora and inside the occupied territories and to help justify the PLO's existence in Palestinian eyes.

The second form of Palestinian military action aimed at preserving the PLO's standing consisted of operations such as assassinations and bombings of Israeli targets in the territories occupied in 1967 and in Israel itself, carried out by local members of the PRM. Palestinian clandestine activity in the occupied territories was not new, but in the 1974–82 period, it both emphasized the PLO's continuing presence and appeal inside Palestine and reinforced the organization's Arab and international standing by demonstrating its military capability (nuisance value at the very least) and political influence within the occupied territories. Moreover, popular support for the PLO in the territories and the dogged persistence of local residents in planning or executing military operations despite the efficiency of Israeli security measures also led many Israelis to question the wisdom of the occupation.

In a sense, all the various forms of Palestinian military action served the PLO's third more immediate aim, that of inducing a general movement toward a resolution of the Palestinian problem, or at least toward addressing its more pressing demands. Combat in south Lebanon between the PLO and the IDF, dramatic raids in Israel itself, and clandestine activity in the occupied territories—all underscored the PLO's determination to wear down Israeli opposition to withdrawal from all or most of the occupied territories in favor of an autonomous Palestinian political authority. Yet, in shifting from the passive objectives of disrupting hostile diplomatic moves or demonstrating presence and vitality, toward the active objective of imposing a solution, the basic flaws in the PLO's politico-military strategy became more apparent.

**Contradictions in Strategy**

The first requirement of any successful political or military action, a clear ultimate goal, was absent. As long as the PLO fought to defend its physical existence and initial political gains, its constituency had a well-defined objective around which it could be mobilized. After 1974, however, ultimate goals were played down while new "phased" objectives were aired. The Palestinian community no longer knew whether total liberation was still a goal, and if so, whether it was to be achieved through protracted warfare or by stages in which peaceful and violent means would be used alternately. Furthermore, there was great ambivalence concerning the "phased" strategy. Were phased objectives indeed transitional? Would
they entail direct negotiations and recognition of Israel? Would they be achieved through international intervention, or did they require some supporting pressure from Palestinian military action?

The confusion over the higher aims of Palestinian action was inevitably reflected on the operational level. Which political objective was each form of military action supposed to serve? In the absence of clear political aims, the validity and success of Palestinian operational objectives could not be measured. If the PLO hoped to establish a democratic secular state for Arabs and Jews in Palestine, then bombings or dramatic raids (both basically indiscriminate) hardly reassured the Israelis of the PLO’s intentions. Indeed, even when the PLO’s political aims were more modest—such as setting up a separate Palestinian ministate (primarily) through international diplomacy—indiscriminate military action worked against Palestinian interests. It hardened Israeli resolve and alienated the very international parties whose pressure on Israel was considered crucial by the PLO.

Similarly, operational performance could not be evaluated or improved since it could not be measured against specific military expectations or adapted to match political needs. Was a PLO combatant in south Lebanon to prepare actively for antitank action, dig foxholes in anticipation of major fighting with the IDF, or would the organization’s diplomatic umbrella prevent Israeli offensives? Did such a combatant’s presence serve a military purpose, or was it merely for show? Was it more important for a secret PLO member in the occupied territories to inflict greater Israeli casualties in fewer, better-planned operations or was it more important to produce a flurry of inefficient actions of higher visibility? The lack of clarity regarding the political, and thus the operational, objectives of Palestinian military action led to striking military negligence. PLO fighters would spend their time drinking tea instead of constructing air raid shelters, although they had been attacked by Israeli artillery and aircraft again and again. Clandestine operatives were given crash training and rushed into military action without further preparation; as a result, security was abysmal and bombs either killed their handlers or failed to explode at all.

The PLO may have been clear on the immediate objectives that specific operations were expected to achieve, but it had an erroneous perception of how those objectives could best be achieved at the tactical level and how they would serve goals at the strategic level. As long as the PLO was working for passive aims, such as protecting its political status or disrupting hostile diplomacy, the chosen military means of dramatic raids and urban bombings appeared appropriate. However, the form and logic of Palestinian military action in the 1974–82 period simply did not relate to the active
political aims that the PLO strove to achieve, such as gaining American political recognition and bringing international pressure to bear on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories. The nature of Palestinian action (especially terrorism) tended to undermine, rather than reinforce, the PLO’s political and moral message to Israel and the West. Conversely, if the PLO was using power politics to force recognition of its role and relinquishment of territory, then it simply did not display the strength and effectiveness—credibility—necessary to back up a belligerent attitude.

Contradictions in PLO strategy were the natural result. Each form of action was seen as having distinct objectives, which it was hoped would lead to different results: bombings inside Israel would pressure the Israeli government, as would shelling from south Lebanon; hostage taking and suicide raids would threaten external actors with regional destabilization; the development of a semiregular army in Lebanon would impress foreign observers with the PLO’s political and institutional maturity. Developing different modes of politico-military action was necessary in view of the formidable objective limitations and complex geopolitical environment within which the PLO worked. Indeed, division of political ends and military means into “sub-ends” and “submeans” was a logical response to the complexity of the Palestinian situation.

However, the contradiction was that the PLO used military tactics in certain arenas that detracted from its main diplomatic effort. Even though it frequently relied on its political gains in one domain to score successes in another (such as utilizing the massive demonstrations of support on the West Bank to further its cause at the UN), the PLO failed to apply this same principle of interdependence to the military-diplomatic sphere. Thus, the separate components of Palestinian strategy did not add up to an integral whole, nor was their effect complementary. In contrast, the PLO’s foes actively manipulated the interdependence of the various arenas of Palestinian activity to their own advantage. In areas of Lebanon under PLO control, massive car bombings and an unending series of clashes between local militias were instigated by outside intelligence services in order to keep the organization off balance. Moreover, by creating a state of anarchy and terror in these areas, these intelligence services succeeded in tarnishing the PLO’s image as a reasonable, responsible interlocutor.

The PLO also believed, mistakenly, that scaled-down political objectives necessitated correspondingly reduced military performance standards. Under this view, since Palestinian military action was now largely intended to convey political messages rather than inflict real damage, professionalism was redundant, and all that was required was a military presence with a
minimal capability to launch operations without concern for results. Given this attitude, it is hardly surprising that the technical competence of the military was seriously neglected. And, as Palestinian military action—whether in the form of operations inside Israel or of self-defense in Lebanon—became less effective, the political message it conveyed was weakened. The PLO thus put itself in the paradoxical position of using force (because it believed its use of force was necessary in the international power system) without making the necessary preparations to make this force credible.

The shortcomings of the Palestinian military in achieving political ends have been most obvious in the direct confrontations with Israel. The PLO could hardly expect to inflict sufficient material damage or present a serious enough physical threat to change Israeli political attitudes, but it did hope to inflict enough casualties to weaken Israeli political will. The approach is hardly novel. It is almost axiomatic in guerrilla campaigns that the real target is the rival's will. How will is affected has differed from one conflict to another. In most cases, will is weakened by an accumulation of economic and human losses, combined with a basic inability to destroy the insurgents' sources of physical and moral strength. In other words, there is a level of material loss beyond which the political costs of pursuing the conflict become unacceptable to the dominant power. In Vietnam, the strategic stakes were high, and the United States paid a heavy price in lives and money before it withdrew. On the other hand, in Cyprus, the British lost few men and relatively little money but withdrew because the mere fact of resistance caused embarrassment in international forums at a time when British influence was already on the wane.  

In the Palestinian case, several distinguishing features have made the implementation of classic guerrilla theory highly dubious. First, although most Israelis have immigrated to the Jewish state, there is no "mother country" to which they can return from Palestine. Contrast this situation to that of the French colons in Algeria, who could return to France and did so, even though some families had been there for 120 years. Israel does suffer from the phenomenon of "reverse migration," in which individual Israelis leave the country permanently, but for much of the population the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation is a zero-sum conflict. Second, both the Israeli economy and defense effort are kept artificially afloat through massive external subsidies, rendering Israel less susceptible to the direct material cost of maintaining the occupation of Arab land. The financial crisis which has developed in the realm of military spending is connected with the regional arms race, not the need to deploy more troops in the West Bank
and Gaza. These and other factors, such as the centrality to Israeli security doctrine of the geographic depth afforded by the West Bank and Golan Heights (particularly), have worked against acceptance by the Israeli leadership and public of political and territorial compromise.

On the other hand, there are several factors present in Israeli society that militate towards change. One is the ethnic and political divisions, which contributed in 1977 to the electoral defeat of the Labor party, and in the summer of 1982 to widespread opposition to the Lebanon war. Although still marginal, there is now a body of Israeli opinion that calls for recognition of some form of Palestinian rights. Another is the small size of the Israeli population, a fact which has rendered that society highly sensitive to any loss of Israeli lives. This vulnerability is what has imbued Palestinian military action with whatever potency it has enjoyed. By threatening Israel lives, Palestinian clandestine operations have often succeeded in generating wider insecurity than would normally be expected in view of their infrequency (compared with the Algerian or even the Cypriot experiences) and general inefficiency.

The Balance Sheet

Over the last twenty years, the Palestinian military instrument has been used most effectively to serve the more practical objectives the PRM has set for itself. Thus, the PLO has unquestionably made real political and diplomatic gains among the Palestinians and internationally, and Israel has felt sufficiently threatened by Palestinian political maneuvers to react militarily. In July 1981, the PLO—which Israel had been unable, due to political constraints, to force to cease fire through physical attrition—became a partner to a cease-fire agreement brokered by Saudi Arabia and the U.S., thereby threatening to emerge as a full-fledged negotiating party in any of the Saudi, Soviet, or European peace initiatives being discussed at the time. To that extent, Palestinian military means correlated to defined political ends.

Nonetheless, the PLO's particular use of its military instrument brought on serious internal debilitation. Given the fact that the aim of military action—whether bombings by underground cells in the occupied territories or firefights by semiregular, full-time forces in south Lebanon—was to provide the Palestinians with usable cards at the negotiating table and political weight in the inter-Arab power balance, the PLO downplayed the importance of its forces' technical performance or the actual success of the operations. This led to low mobilization and poor utilization of Palestinian
human and material resources, and to a seasonal approach to recruitment, training, planning, and combat. The resulting dissatisfaction with the political outlook within the PLO's military and organizational base led to widespread demoralization. The ultimate reflection of this problem was the high turnover rate among military and other full-time personnel, and a lack of sufficient numbers even for purposes of basic self-defense.

Moreover, in adopting state logic and wielding the military instrument as a bargaining chip in the Lebanese and regional power games, the PLO deprived Palestinian military action of much of its moral justification. From 1974 onwards, the PLO/PRM appeared as a purely Palestinian movement, seeking narrow, parochial interests that were not vital to the populations of its host countries. Eventually, the movement could ensure its continued presence in certain parts of Lebanon only by imposing itself by force, or the threat of force, when local political "arrangements" failed.

It appears that the political logic governing the use of the Palestinian military force remains unchanged. Since leaving Lebanon, the mainstream Palestinian forces of the PLO have undertaken three kinds of military action. One has been operations carried out by clandestine members inside the occupied territories. A second has been repeated attempts by combat squads to infiltrate into Israel, mainly by sea but occasionally across the Lebanese or Jordanian land borders. The third area of action has been the reconstruction of a modest military capability in Lebanon both to support anti-Israeli operations and to protect the refugee camps. In contrast, the Palestinian opposition has generally refrained from anti-Israeli action, although it maintains a visible military presence in Lebanon. An extremist fringe of the opposition has indulged in international and anti-PLO terrorism in an effort to discredit the PLO abroad and thus disrupt any peace efforts in which it may become involved as the Palestinian people's representative.

The salient factor in recent Palestinian military action is the return to basically passive aims. The PLO is concerned with safeguarding its legitimacy in Palestinian eyes and with reminding the Arab and international actors of its presence and interests. The opposition is trying to undermine the PLO leadership politically, both externally, by rejecting diplomatic contacts with Arab countries such as Jordan and Egypt or the U.S., and internally, by rebuilding support networks among the Palestinians of Lebanon and the occupied territories. The one possible exception to this categorization of passivity is the increasing proportion of operations being carried out inside the occupied territories by individuals or self-generated cells unaffiliated with any known guerrilla group. This growing phenom-
enon stems from the absolute contradiction between the long-term aims of the Israeli military occupation and the vital interests of the local population.

Leaving aside this new, third category of armed action, Palestinian activity in virtually all spheres is now geared to buying time rather than to achieving concrete gains. In resorting to military means to support minimal objectives, it continues to be the fact of military action that is supposed to influence the other parties to the conflict and convince them of the inevitability of including the Palestinians in any political process. This insistence on the fact, rather than the content, of armed action explains the PLO's apparent inability, or unwillingness, to invest major efforts in improving military performance. Thus, individual operations have at times made little political (public relations) sense, even while displaying poor technical competence. Yet for all the Palestinian factions, there is an overall direction to military action: to keep the Palestinian cause alive and prolong the tenure of the PLO/PRM as its embodiment. It remains to be seen whether the formal institutions of the PLO and organized guerrilla groups will survive their current crisis, but the growing climate of violence in the occupied territories portends a surge, not a decline, of armed conflict in Palestine.

1. Some 15,000 men were evacuated, but at least 3,000 were Syrian troops or members of the Syrian-controlled Palestine Liberation Army.
2. The cities were Tyre, Sidon, and West Beirut, while the PLO enjoyed considerable influence in Tripoli as well. On the PLO's role and Lebanese perceptions of it, see Rashid Khalidi, Under Siege: PLO Decision-making During the 1982 War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), chap. 1, "The PLO and the Lebanese before the 1982 War." The PLO's parallel power was much like that of the Lebanese Front in other parts of Lebanon, though the PLO generally avoided matters of civilian administration. Lewis Snider studies the Front's rule in "The Lebanese Forces: Their Origins and Role in Lebanon's Politics," Middle East Journal 38, no. 1, (Winter 1984).
3. Adeed Dawisha says that Lebanon was the only Palestinian base after 1970, and so the PLO was particularly sensitive to Syrian pressure. See "The Motives of Syria's Involvement in Lebanon," Middle East Journal 38, no. 2 (Spring 1984):235.
5. The PLO leaders did eventually reenter Lebanon, on the basis that the early with-
6. Although similar, the PRM and PLO have never been identical. The term PRM refers to the guerrilla movement as a whole, including several minor groups that were not always represented on the PLO's Executive Committee. The PLO, conversely, embraces all Palestinian organizations, including unions and other nonmilitary structures, and civilian 'independents.' The terms are used distinctly for the years before 1968 and after 1982, and virtually synonymously between 1973 and 1982.

7. Recently there have been indications of activity inside the occupied territories by opposition groups. See "IDF Suspects at Least Four Terror Squads," Jerusalem Post, 3 May 1986.

8. By 1981, all Palestinian factions had accepted this principle, as indicated by their acceptance of the Brezhnev Plan, which called for recognition of Israel's existence. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod notes that after 1974, the PLO emphasized the alternative concept of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; see "Lebanon and Palestine: Some Contrasts in the Application of the Principles of National Liberation," Arab Studies Quarterly (Fall 1985): 85.

9. This also had tremendous impact on the Palestinian military situation. See Yezid Sayigh, "Israel's Military Performance in the 1982 War," Journal of Palestine Studies 13, no. 1 (Fall 1983).


11. This point was emphasized by a PLO writer who wrote that "the institutional achievement is an ambition of all revolutions. . . . [In the Palestinian case,] its first and foremost feature is that the general Palestinian institution is the organized expression of Palestinian national identity"; see Mahjub 'Umar, "The Palestinian Ramadan War: Position and Results," Shu'un Filastiniyyah, no. 119 (Beirut): 78–79.

12. Dan Schudetan expresses this by saying that it was "in the political sphere that the military instrument was to find expression"; see "The PLO after Lebanon," Jerusalem Quarterly, no. 28 (Summer 1983): 3.

13. Guerrilla operations rose from 97 in 1967; to 916 in 1968; 2,432 in 1969; and then dropped to 1,887 in 1970. Israeli casualties, though rising from 38 in 1967 to 273 in 1968, actually dropped in 1969 to 243, and then to 111 in 1970. The number of Israeli casualties per incident dropped from 0.39 in 1967 to 0.063 in 1970. There are many estimates of guerrilla losses, but roughly speaking, they doubled every year, from 60 deaths in 1967 to 240 in 1969.

14. Jordanian Prime Minister Wafsi al-Tal estimated their numbers at 2,500 in a press conference. See text in Arab Political Documents 1971 (Beirut: American University of Beirut), 506–7. PLO sources gave a higher estimate of 3,000 men. See, for example, al-Yaumiyat al-Filastiniyyah [Palestinian Chronology] 14 (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1973), 84. The same Palestinian sources estimated that 1,000 men had escaped to Syria during the fighting, while the Jordanian government released 1,600 of its prisoners, half of whom left for Syria and other Arab countries. See Ibid 98. Most of the expelled men, many with their families, ended up in Lebanon. A likely figure is 15,000, although some sources have suggested 50,000.

15. According to Arafat, some 920 men were killed in the summer of 1970. Quoted in al-Yaumiyat al-Filastiniyyah 12, 684. Tal said that 200 guerrillas were missing after the July showdown (see footnote 14). According to official Jordanian sources, 200–300 men remained in detention (Ibid, 98), though 600–700 is more likely, based on Tal's figures.

16. According the Israeli "open bridges" policy instituted by Moshe Dayan soon after the June 1967 war, relatives of inhabitants of the West Bank and other areas could visit the occupied territories after obtaining special permits. By 1971, over 100,000 people were using this facility annually (al-
Yawmiyyat al-Filastiniyyah 14, xv); the PRM could, and did, take advantage of the policy to smuggle military items and messages into the West Bank with its emissaries.


19. The elements of this “state” are mentioned in Rashid Khalidi, “The Palestinians in Lebanon: Social Repercussions of Israel’s Invasion,” Middle East Journal 38 no. 2 (Spring 1984).

20. PLO Chief-of-Staff Sayil mentioned in an interview, for example, that the PLO could not face Israeli air power alone, and that the defense of Lebanon required broad Arab action. “Sa’d Sayil: We Created a Psychological Gap Between the Israeli Citizen and His Leadership,” Shi‘un Filastiniyyah, no. 119 (Beirut): 116.

21. There were also internal reasons for the shift to semiregular forms, the most important of which were the need to absorb ex-Jordanian army regulars who had joined Fatah during the 1970 civil war in Jordan, and the wish to quell the political discontent that surfaced within the guerrilla forces in 1971–72, as told to the author in interviews with three senior guerrilla officers in Amman, spring 1985.

22. An Arab officer and military writer posed this question as early as 1972: “The PRM faced a dilemma. It knew that rushing to operate with all its strength in the occupied land would lead to the exposure and destruction of its cells, and that it needed a respite to reorganize itself. Yet it was also obliged to escalate activity inside [the occupied territories] by throwing its reserve forces [into the fray]. The PRM chose the hard way: it escalated action . . . ”, see Lieutenant Colonel Haytham al-Ayyubi, “The Military Activity of the Resistance Organizations and Israeli Counteraction,” Al-Kitab al-Sanawi l-il-Qadiyyah al-Filastiniyyah, 1971 [Yearbook of the Palestinian Issue, 1971] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1975), 55.

23. While the Vietnam conflict cost an estimated 55,000 American lives and $155 billion, the Cyprus campaign only cost the British government a few dozen soldiers and £90 million in four years; see Robert Asprey, War in the Shadows (London: Macdonald and Jane’s, 1975), 973. Moreover, the level of insurgent activity in Cyprus was higher than Palestinian rates (except for 1969), reaching 416 operations in November 1957 alone; Ibid, 971. At their peak, the Algerian insurgents carried out 1,500 to 2,000 urban operations a month in mid-1958, while their lowest level was 200 operations a month in January 1959; see Alistair Horne, Savage War of Peace; (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 317.

24. This body of opinion is best represented by former MK Uri Avneri and MK General Matti Peled.

25. In the words of Israeli commentator Hirsch Goodman, “The success of a terrorist operation is seldom judged either by the military proficiency with which it was carried out, or by the number of casualties caused, but by its political and psychological impact,” in “The Politics of Terror,” Jerusalem Post, 22–28 April 1985.

26. According to Z'eve Schiff, although the rate has dropped compared with previous years, at least 50 to 70 percent of all clandestine Palestinian operators are arrested; in Ha’aretz, 9 September 1985. Clandestine action has been growing steadily since 1983, but it is too early to tell how lasting a development this is.

27. This phenomenon is noted and discussed by several Israeli commentators, such as Z’ev Schiff, Uzi Mehnaimi, Pinhas Inbari, and Dani Rubinstein, in Ha’aretz, 9 September 1985; ‘Al-Hamishmar, 29 July 1985; ‘Al-Hamishmar, 28 July 1985; and Davar, 9 October 1985; cited respectively by Khalad.

28. In his interview (pp. 14–15), quoted in footnote 10 above, Abu Jihad emphasized that the PLO did not measure success by the tactical results of military operations, but by displaying Palestinian will and insistence on continuing the fight until Palestinian rights are restored.