

Can Terror work? The Case of the Palestine Liberation Organisation

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JACK GREIG, AUG 9 2011

The use of terror as a tactic to achieve political ends is not a new phenomenon. Its roots date back to the Babylonian occupation of Israel in the 7th century AD. It was popularized by the French Revolution in the 1790's, initiated by a discontented populace as an affront to a tyrannical and unjust Jacobin monarchy. By modern accounts the objectives, and methods used to achieve those objectives, previously characterised by tactical terror, have changed (Hoffman 2006: 3). The emergence of quasi-religious, international apocalyptic organisations with grandiose and unrealistic aspirations, such as Al Qaeda, has greatly undermined the tactic of terror as a legitimate reaction to injustice. Despite this new trend, Garton Ash explains that by analyzing the goals of most terrorist organisations we can deduce that a majority are pursuing legitimate political objectives that exist within the international status-quo and, "may sooner or later be achieved in the real world" (2001); such as human rights, independence or self-determination. When an entity makes the decision to engage in the use of terror they enter into an unstable world in which they must tread carefully along an awkwardly thin line, with the world as a theatre, the terrorist's objective is to engage in acts that garner local and international support and recognition and therefore help and not hinder their political objectives.

In this essay I will critically analyse if the use of terror has worked to assist or undermine the political objectives of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation). In the case of the PLO I will be arguing that the use of terror was successful in obtaining international recognition, after previous non-terror based attempts had failed, but ultimately failed to support the organisation's political objectives. This was due to the nature in which recognition was acquired, and a manifest failure to channel all subsequent efforts into the prevailing peaceful and politically 'above the belt' campaign for an independent Palestinian state. To effectively construe my argument I will begin by analysing the PLO's revolutionary decision to turn to the use of tactical terror to achieve their political objectives, and the failed insurgency attempts that led to the said decision. Secondly, I will analyse the success of the PLO's use of international terror that led to its recognition by the international community under UN (United Nations) auspices. Finally, I will examine how the PLO's use of terror worked to paradoxically undermine their political campaign, and how their failure to control factionalised relatives and former partners led to the rejection of their political objectives by the international community.

The PLO's decision to turn to terror for the advancement of their political objectives was formulated on the back of failed attempts to attract the international community to the recognition of perceived atrocities against the Arab inhabitants of Palestine, including a foiled insurgency within the West Bank. With the withdrawal of Britain from Palestine under the direction of the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the creation of a UN partitioned Israeli state in 1948, Palestinians became hopelessly displaced (Hoffman, 2006: 64). The subsequent Arab Alliance invasion of Israel in 1948 only worked to strengthen the resolve of the Israeli's and the brutality of their occupation, taking further land off Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. In 1964 the PLO was established, "to attain the objective of liquidating Israel" (Kramer 2006: 8), and in 1965 Fatah, a revolutionary left-wing Palestinian political party, joined the PLO and its leader Yasser Arafat was elected chairman. The PLO effectively became a multi-party confederation that acted as an umbrella organisation and launching pad for various para-military groups, with support from various other major political parties from around the Arab world, such as Iraq's revolutionary Ba'ath Party (to be led by Saddam Hussein in the future) (Halliday, 2005: 36). Due to the failed invasion of Israel and the continual oppression of Arab Palestinian

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nationals, the PLO made steps towards the creation of an Arab insurgency in the West Bank, derived from Leninist and Maoist revolutionary principles. Despite this change in tactic, the insurgency, known as the Fedayeen, were largely unsuccessful.

As Gearty suggests: "The subversion to which they aspired, was circumvented by their lack of a popular home base; the Fedayeen were operating from Beirut or Cairo, not fighting on enemy ground" (1999: 49).

Furthermore, unlike the majority of Palestinians who were displaced by Israeli settlements within greater Israel, the inhabitants of the West Bank, which at this time was still unofficial Palestinian territory, stood to lose a lot (including homes and livelihoods) by pursuing the struggle against their powerful neighbour. To add to this, the Fedayeen were poorly trained and consisted of fighters from across the Pan-Arab region, which paradoxically worked to emphasize the nationalist disconnect between the guerrillas and the local West Bank population, inhibiting the Fedayeen in their battle for hearts and minds (Gearty, 1999: 52).

To paraphrase Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Tse Tung – the sea was not of a temperature to allow the guerrillas to swim like fish through the school of the population (Hoffman, 2006: 52).

Israel's stern retaliation and use of disproportionate violence effectively suppressed the Fedayeen, handing them a heavy defeat that resulted in the 1967 Six Day War, an embarrassment for Egypt and her allies. Consequently, the Palestinian struggle remained relatively obscure, rarely appearing on the international radar. For the PLO it became evident that it was therefore necessary for them to take further and more radical steps to ensure the participation of the international community in their struggle (Savigh 2000: 12).

Hoffman reiterates,

"although Palestinian terrorist activities precipitated a significant international crisis (Suez) and eleven years later led to a major regional war – notwithstanding the plight of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, many of whom were still living in the abject poverty of squalid refugee camps nearly two decades after their exile had begun – few outside the region took any notice of, or much less cared about the Palestinians " (2006: 66).

The PLO's failed insurgency attempts, including their embarrassing and painstaking defeats at the hands of Israel, failed to conjure any significant outside recognition and support, which in turn, successfully worked to spur them out of the doldrums of obscurity and towards the implementation of terrorist tactics to achieve their political objectives.

The PLO's international terror campaign was largely successful in drawing global attention to their plight, effectively aiding them to achieve their desired level of awareness. The PLO initially limited their attacks to state infrastructure and 'Zionist' institutions, characterised by hit and run attacks in hostile territory on Israeli installations (Gearty, 1991: 49). However, in order to 'educate western public opinion' they switched their target to civilians both within and outside of Israel in an attempt to create further hype and precipitate greater media coverage. The PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), the second largest military faction after the Fatah, and at the time, under the broad banner of the PLO, hijacked a myriad of El Al and Lufthansa flights throughout the 60's and 70's. The PFLP were careful not to engage in the indiscriminate killing of European nationals, so as not to alienate the European and western populace from siding with the resistance (Hoffman, 2006: 65). The PFLP shot to international acclaim on August 29 1969 when Leila Khaled, a young charismatic female radical, became the first woman to hi-jack a commercial airliner. The stunt, which cemented Khaled as the popular face of the PFLP, was undertaken without any casualties; all passengers had been disembarked from the airliner before it was blown up in front of the international media. This event was incredibly beneficial to the greater political objectives of the PLO.

As Elhstain explains, "... hijacks were a political tool of the moment, when commitment, extreme risk and sacrifice were admired and often romanticized" (Elhstain, 1987: 7).

Khaled won much admiration from the mainstream due to her Christian roots and vogue personality; she possessed an innate ability to activate a level of sympathy from the Western population, frequently speaking of the generosity

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she received from Britons and the strong relationships she enjoyed with her female guards whilst under arrest after a later hi-jacking. To add to this, she was also used as a pin up for human rights organisations and feminist groups (the latter she rejects on the grounds of being a fighter for Palestine only and not for women) who admired her exploits and described her as a woman who, “flamboyantly overcame the patriarchal restrictions of Arab society where women are traditionally subservient to their husbands, by taking an equal fighting role with men, by getting divorced and remarried, having children in her late 30s, and rejecting vanity by having her face reconstructed for her cause” (El Sadaawi, 1982: 16).

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has, in the past, supplied the well-worn metaphor that the media often supplies the oxygen of publicity on which [terrorists] depend (Taylor, 1993: 42), holding the power to romanticize and glorify an otherwise bloody struggle. The 1972 Munich Games attack, arguably the most remembered and internationally renowned attack in public memory sensationally captured the world’s attention, forcing them to actively engage in the Palestinian drama. The attack, orchestrated by a small sect of disgruntled former Fedayeen members who called themselves the ‘Black September’, was seen as a reaction to the events surrounding the 1970 expulsion of the PLO from Jordan, ordered by King Hussein (Cooley, 1973: 126). It was heralded as a spectacular media coup by even the most senior of PLO officials, who were attempting to distance themselves from personal involvement in what turned out to be a bloody altercation with a total of 15 casualties.

Scholar John K Cooley, describes that the Munich games attack courted,

“the undivided attention of some four thousand print and radio journalists and two thousand television reporters and crew already in place to cover the Olympiad [who were] suddenly refocused on Palestine and the Palestinian cause” (1973: 126).

In the weeks that followed, thousands of Palestinians rushed to join the terrorist organisation (Hoffman, 2006: 70). Nobody could continue to risk ignoring the Palestinians and their cause, and a little over a year later Yasser Arafat was invited to address the UN General Assembly and the PLO was recognized as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and were granted special observer status within the international body (Hoffman, 2006: 70). The PLO’s international terror campaign was successful in capturing the attention of the international community through riding the wave of revolutionary romanticism and by targeting high profile events with great potential for media saturation, the end result being recognition by the world’s premier international institution, providing the platform upon which the PLO could pursue its political objectives in a remarkably different and more peaceful way.

Nevertheless, despite being successful in drawing the world’s attention towards their plight, the PLO’s international terror campaign also paradoxically served to undermine the organisation’s political objectives and newfound diplomatic avenue in a number of ways. In Yasser Arafat’s inaugural address to the United Nations General Assembly on November 13 1974 he made the following proclamation,

“Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter’s gun... do not let the olive branch fall from my hand” (Savigh, 2000: 1).

This boldly assertive statement came to typify the organisation’s peaceful venture into the realm of politically ‘above-the-belt’ diplomacy, and their congruent inability to withdraw their image from being synonymous with violent terrorism. Their immediate terrorist activities did not win plaudits from all camps, and for many powerful western governments, such as the USA and Great Britain, PLO-supported international acts of violence became the best argument for continuing to give the Israelis the support they demanded (Gearty, 1991: 52). Furthermore, the PLO’s dubious alliances with terrorist groups from across the globe, who came to learn terrorist and guerrilla warfare tactics within their Jordan and Lebanon based training camps, did not sit well with the West. The German Red Army Faction (RAF), led by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, were one such group of sympathisers, who adopted the Palestinian cause at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. The RAF followed a growing trend of discontented young revolutionaries engaged in home-grown terrorism, intent on changing the status-quo. These dubious links only worked to entrench the PLO in the global revolutionary socialist agenda, alienating themselves from Europe and the USA, which greatly harmed the peaceful pursuit of their political objectives (Reuter, 2002: 26).

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The PLO's failure to control all of the organisations under its umbrella structure and funnel all of its efforts into its prevailing peaceful endeavour also greatly damaged the organisation's political objectives. Yasser Arafat's denunciation of violence in 1988 opened the door for serious peace talks between Israel and the PLO, but also led to the radicalization of several more radical PLO factions (such as the PFLP) breaking out to form the Rejectionist Front, which would act independently from the PLO over the subsequent years (PFLP, 2010). Suspicion between the Arafat-led mainstream and more hard-line factions, inside and outside the PLO, have continued to dominate the inner workings of the organization ever since, often resulting in paralysis or conflicting courses of action (Halliday, 2005: 83). The Oslo Peace Accords of 1991 were seen by many as a monumental step towards a two state solution and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians (Hoffman, 2006: 71). But disputes over Jerusalem and the ensuing death of Yasser Arafat saw the rise of more radical quasi-religious Islamic jihadist groups, such as Hamas and Hizballah who have in recent times dominated not only the political landscape but the headlines also, vindicating the commonly uttered phrase, 'once a terrorist, always a terrorist'; so difficult is it to weed out radical thought once it has begun to embed itself in the minds of a populace (Reuter, 2002: 28). The PLO's failure to capture the support of the West, their damaging links with the global socialist movement and their inability to control factionalised radicals seriously undermined their peaceful endeavour to achieve their political objectives.

It is evident that, despite its initial success, the PLO was never able to achieve its ultimate political objective by using terrorist tactics. The PLO's turn to global terror tactics, and the immense amount of media exposure that move generated, only magnified their inability to move away from their formerly violent agenda. Edward Said describes current relations between the Israeli and Palestinian people as a, "disheartening, not to say bloody, impasse" (2000: 82). Perhaps though, the fact that the Palestinian people are still continuing to strive for what they feel are their legitimate rights, through a multitude of peaceful platforms, signifies a victory in itself.

In the words of Hoffman,

"More than forty years after its founding, the PLO – though still short of its ultimate goal of true sovereignty over a bona fide Palestinian state – has nonetheless survived expulsions and dislocations, internal rivalry and external enmity, to continue the struggle begun long ago in an equally transformed political environment" (2006: 78).

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