

Terrorism and the PLO: The Effectiveness of Terrorism as a Political Tool

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SARAH GILMOUR, DEC 5 2016

Familiar to students of politics and international relations, Carl von Clausewitz once asserted that “war is a continuation of politics by other means”.^[1] Terrorism is hardly a novel phenomenon, but it has become a prominent form of warfare in the modern era. It can be understood, in a Clausewitzian manner, as the continuation of dramatically asymmetric political and ideational struggles by other violent means. Academic material debating the effectiveness of terrorism often points to Palestine and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as an example of the successful use of terrorism to achieve political aims. However, I will argue in this paper that while it may achieve some smaller, secondary goals, the example of the PLO’s terrorist campaign against Israel demonstrates that terrorism is unlikely to be an effective tool to achieve ultimate political goals. The campaign of terrorism undertaken by the PLO during the 1960s and 1970s will be focused upon. This paper will not examine more recent terrorist activities. To begin, this paper will undertake a brief overview of the PLO, its history, and its political goals. Then, the two most common pieces of evidence used to substantiate claims of terrorism’s effectiveness for the PLO, the creation of global attention to the Palestinian cause and acceptance as a legitimate actor in negotiations, will be examined and rebutted in three arguments. First, I assert that terrorist tactics simultaneously brought the Palestinian struggle to global attention and delegitimised the PLO’s nationalistic struggle. Secondly, this paper will argue that any contribution to the PLO’s negotiation power, which arose due to increases in their diplomatic standing with Israel and other actors, has been undermined constantly by the multiplicity and diversity of competing factions. Thirdly, I will argue that obtaining a ‘seat at the negotiation table’ has not been sufficient to achieve the PLO’s main political objectives as realising these goals would pose an existential threat to the targeted government of Israel. Before concluding, the Palestinian example will be utilised to provide a reflection on the overall effectiveness of terrorism as an instrument of political influence.

The PLO and Its Political Goals

At the conclusion of the British Mandate of Palestine following the end of the Second World War, Palestinian nationalism and independence clashed directly with the creation of Israel as a homeland for the persecuted European Jewish populations. As Wendy Pearlman notes, the initial Palestinian nationalist movement was “...largely shattered by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War”.^[2] Israel seized control of much of the Arab state created by the partition of the Palestinian mandate under UN Resolution 181.^[3] More than 700,000 Palestinian refugees were displaced into neighbouring countries, with the anger and humiliation of defeat driving the formation of guerrilla groups engaging in Fedayeen hit-and-run attacks across the border into Israel.^[4] These groups eventually came to operate under the umbrella term Palestine Liberation Organisation. In 1965, the PLO declared its joint agenda of liberating Palestine through armed struggle and re-establishing the Palestinian borders present during British Mandate.^[5]

Media Attention and Delegitimation

While terrorist attacks certainly brought Palestine’s struggle to global attention, it simultaneously delegitimised the nationalistic struggle of the PLO. Scholars such as Bruce Hoffman and Christopher Harmon who point to the efforts of the PLO as an example of terrorism’s utility as a political tactic tend to place a heavy emphasis on the internationalisation of their cause to draw general world attention to the Palestinian plight, as distinct from the general

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Arab struggle.[6] As Bassam Abu Sharif highlights, the PLO and all groups within it “...remained under the control of neighbouring Arab states...that were making all the decisions concerning the Arab-Israeli struggle”.[7] Although they had support of these states, the PLO had no autonomy and “...no right to independent decision making”.[8] This continued until the struggle against Israel was internationalised through the targeting and hijacking of civil aviation, capitalising on the newly advanced quality in television news broadcasting and utilising “...reliable means of attracting attention to themselves and their cause”.[9] Rhetoric exalting the supposed success of plane hijackings and the Munich Olympics massacre are very similar, and clearly illustrate the PLO’s political goal of publicising their national struggle. PFLP founder George Habash explained, “when we hijack a plane it has more effect than if we killed a hundred Israelis in battle”.[10] Munich Olympics massacre was likened to “...painting the name of Palestine on a mountain that can be seen from the four corners of the earth”.[11] Scholars such as Harmon classify this mass media attention as realising “...a prime political objective”.[12]

While it is difficult to deny the media successes and publicity achieved by the PLO through the tactic of terrorism, it is clear that such strategies “...did more harm than good to Palestinian aspirations, tarnishing their national struggle with associations of terrorism”.[13] The civilian casualties of the radical violence undertaken in the 1970s in particular impacted both general public opinion of the international community and more moderate Palestinian factions. For example, rival factions such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine lamented that “...the hijackings have brought about the loss of sympathy in world opinion- a sympathy for which we have worked so hard to foster”.[14] Additionally, these tactics lost the support of conservative Arab governments such as Jordan as they “feared their public image would plummet with the Palestinians”.[15] Statements from PLO leaders such as “at least now the world is talking about us” exemplify the somewhat irrational justification of negative shifts in opinion.[16] It is evident the PLO utilised terrorism with the aim of attracting global attention to their cause, regardless of the consequential delegitimisation of its ultimate political goals.

In comparing the Palestinian struggle to other popular struggles after the Second World War, Max Abrahms notes other successes appear to be rooted in the delegitimisation of colonialism.[17] Key Palestinian figures such as poet Mahmoud Darwish certainly sought to frame their struggle within an anti-colonial narrative, proclaiming in 1973 that “in the conscience of the peoples of the world, the torch has been passed from Vietnam to us”. However, by the 1970s and 1980s, it became difficult for such a characterisation to be successfully used to justify civilian casualties to the international population. Thus, the perceived legitimacy of the PLO’s terrorist tactics declined following a steep dive in public sympathy for the nationalist cause, and the waning ability to centre the conflict within anti-colonial narrative. It is evident that although the PLO’s terrorism strategy succeeded in drawing public attention to the Palestinian struggle, it was limited in its long term effectiveness as it was unable to justify mass civilian casualties, simultaneously undermining their ultimate political goal of a Palestinian state.

Diplomacy and Spoiler Factions

Despite contributing to the PLO’s diplomatic standing with Israel and indeed the world, negotiations for a settlement were constantly been undermined by the multiplicity and diversity of factions operating within the PLO. A second key PLO success often referred to by scholars is “...eighteen months after Munich [Olympics’ terrorist attack] the PLO’s leader, Yasir Arafat, was invited to address the UN General Assembly”, where he made his well-known ‘gun and olive branch’ speech, highlighting the PLO’s willingness to participate in diplomatic processes.[18] Shortly afterward, the PLO was granted special observer status at the UN,[19] and the United Nations General assembly passed Resolution 3236 which affirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including self-determination, national independence, and sovereignty.[20] Obtaining a ‘seat at the table’ in a prominent diplomatic body through which they could advance their political goals held particular significance, as any independent Palestinian voice had previously been lost in the interests articulated by neighbouring Arab states. Furthermore, by the end of the 1970s the PLO had formal diplomatic relations with more countries than Israel.[21] There are those who assert “it is doubtful whether the PLO could ever have achieved this success had it not resorted to international terrorism”.[22]

While the PLO successfully obtained an avenue through which to articulate their political interests, the question remained exactly whose interests would be advanced. It is significant to note that the PLO is an umbrella for multiple,

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diverse factions. The problem emerged, as Pearlman highlights, that “to claim to speak to all Palestinians...the PLO had to include the full spectrum of Palestinian politics...as a result, the PLO was never a single decision-maker as much as a forum of decision making”.^[23] More radical factions became ‘spoilers’- groups who “...use violence or other means to undermine negotiations in the expectation that a settlement will threaten their power interests”.^[24] For example, some factions of the PLO, generally the more moderate ones, indicated their willingness to participate in the Geneva peace conference in 1973, following the Yom Kippur War.^[25] However, more radical factions saw the decision to negotiate with Israel as a betrayal to their absolutist goals, as this involved impliedly recognising Israel as a legitimate state.^[26] It is evident that groups within the PLO used terrorism with an intention to disrupt peace talks, as they perceived such negotiations to threaten what they perceived to be important long-term objectives.^[27]

This problem of diverse factions undermining the direction chosen by the PLO leadership clearly exemplifies why “few, if any, experts on and practitioners of insurgency have not stressed the importance of unity within insurgent ranks”.^[28] The importance of unity in armed struggles is highlighted by both Pearlman and Kraus, as it is generally counterproductive when internal division and infighting undermine the strategic progress attempted by a centralised command.^[29] Furthermore, as discussed by Peter Neumann, governments often consider a group’s level of internal cohesion as a critical factor in determining whether to negotiate with a terrorist group.^[30] A group’s credibility as an interlocutor is heavily influenced by the ability of its leadership to control all subordinates and enforce the commitments of potential settlements.^[31] While terrorism may have gotten the PLO a seat at the diplomatic table, internal divisions and the actions of more radical spoiler factions conveyed the group’s lack of unity and increased scepticism of its ability to be a credible and effective negotiator. This further enforces the assertion that terrorism is only effective in realising short term aims, rather than ultimate political objectives.

Taking a unique approach to the PLO’s diplomatic struggles, Paul Chamberlin centres the Palestinian struggle as part of a global paradigm shift in global politics where Third World nations were able to force their agendas in international organisations such as the UN.^[32] He suggests that terrorism was a legitimate and effective means of contributing to this shift.^[33] However, as Craig Daigle critiques, this approach “...overestimates the PLO’s ability to influence regional politics...”, pointing to the failure of the PLO to come even “...remotely close to establishing a Palestinian state either through political or military efforts”.^[34] It is evident that while the PLO may exemplify a trend of small nations successfully articulating their agendas in the United Nations through terrorist means, this did not translate into realisation of overarching political goals.

Political Aims and Existential Threats

Obtaining a ‘seat at the table’ has not been sufficient to achieve the PLO’s main political objectives, as realising these goals would pose an existential threat to the targeted government of Israel. The original political solution for Palestine was developed by the United Nations in 1947, when the British were nearing the end of its Mandate. Resolution 181 proposed the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states within Mandate Palestine, with Jerusalem recommended to be administered independently of either state.^[35] While the Jewish leadership accepted this proposition, while noting its limitations, the partition was antithetic to the PLO’s original main political aim of the “...elimination of the state of Israel and the establishment of a democratic state for Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Palestine” through armed struggle.^[36] This resistance to partition is highlighted by Ahmad Al-Shuqayri, founder of the PLO, who allegedly declared that he would have no problem ‘throwing the Jews into the sea’ in pursuit of a united, independent Palestine.^[37]

However, from June 1974, the PLO endorsed ‘all means of struggle’, hence sanctioning both diplomatic and military methods of pursuing their political goals.^[38] Combined with private messages sent to US officials indicating Arafat’s willingness to accept the state of Israel, this “...represented a monumental shift toward a two state solution”.^[39] While Arafat and more moderate PLO factions would come to accept the possibility of a two state solution to the conflict, more radical groups continue to hold this position to this day.

Regardless of whether a single or two state solution is pursued, acceptance of this ultimate political end by Israel would pose a threat to the state’s very existence as it stands today. Abrahms characterises Palestine’s struggles as a campaign with a ‘maximalist’ objective, where the aim is to “...induce the target government into ceding power or

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altering its ideology".[40] Seceding part or all of its territory to a Palestinian state poses an existential and psychological threat to Israel, while not necessarily a physical threat due to its military dominance.[41] Thus, appeasement with the PLO is at the least, difficult, and at most, unrealistic. It is evident clear that while terrorism allowed the PLO to make initial inroads to their political aims, the threats their ultimate aims pose to Israel's existence have created a political stalemate lasting more than 40 years.

Terrorism as an Instrument of Political Influence

The PLO's experience employing terrorism against Israel in attempts to achieve its political goals reveal underlying lessons regarding terrorism generally, and its level of effectiveness as an instrument of political influence. What is clear from the PLO's experience is that terrorism can seek to achieve a variety of political goals, but that it is more successful in achieving some of these than others. Max Abrahms distinguishes between two types of goals which terrorist groups seek to achieve. First, there are process goals which have the intention of sustaining the group through a variety of means.[42] Attracting widespread media attention and securing diplomatic legitimacy fit within the examples provided by Abrahms.[43] While such objectives are argued by some to fall outside the scope of political objectives, it is clear from the Palestinian example that it is better to describe them as "...more limited objectives that guide their actions or what they seek to achieve".[44] Furthermore, terrorist groups have outcome goals, which are the stated political ends or 'final destination' the group seeks to achieve.[45] Unlike process goals, these can only be achieved with the compliance of the target government.[46] The PLO's outcome goal of establishing a Palestinian state, either alone or alongside Israel, has not been achieved through terrorist activities. In fact, the PLO recognised by the mid-1970s that terrorism and violence had its limits in achieving its goals, putting this instrument to rest. Arafat and the PLO leadership espoused the importance of 'the gun and the olive branch', both violence and diplomacy to achieve their aims. However, over time it is evident that the gun has been recognised as less effective than the olive branch in obtaining the ultimate political aims. Thus, it is apparent that process goals can be achieved through terrorist activities reasonably effectively, but outcome goals are far more difficult to achieve through these means. Over time, a terrorist group which seriously seeks to realise their ultimate political outcomes will come to realise that terrorism by itself will not coerce a government to comply with their demands. As such, terrorism is limited to achieving only secondary aims, rather than ultimate political goals.

Conclusion

In summation, the PLO's terrorist campaign against Israel exemplifies the both the potential and limitations of terrorism as an instrument of political influence. The evidence is clear that the use of terrorist violence was able to bring the Palestinian's struggle to international attention, and force Israel and the international community to allow the PLO's involvement in diplomatic negotiations. However, the violence which attracted media attention also delegitimised the nationalistic struggle of the PLO in the eyes of the general public. Negotiations have been constantly undermined the diverse factions and competing formulations of ultimate political goals. Finally, the existential threat which the PLO's ultimate political goals pose to Israel have caused a stalemate lasting over forty years. The PLO eventually learned it is the process goals, not the stated political ends which terrorism can effectively influence. Thus, it is clear that while some successes are evident in influencing secondary, process goals, the PLO's terrorist campaign against Israel demonstrates that terrorism is unlikely to be an effective tool to achieve ultimate political goals in asymmetric struggles.

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Footnotes

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