

Explore the “International Dimension” of Palestinian terrorism during the 1960s and 1970s: Their objectives outside of Israel/Palestine, Achievements and Impact

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This essay examines the international dimension of Palestinian terrorism during the 1960s and 1970s, exploring the historical context and the issue of legitimacy that drove it. The failure of the British government and the United Nations to fulfil their promises to the Palestinians, and the desire of Palestinian nationalists to be recognized as the only representative of the Palestinians, led to the targeting of objectives outside of Israel/Palestine. While some achievements were made, such as the recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians, it came at the cost of sacrificing many lives of ordinary people. The practices of Palestinian terrorists have also changed the modern understanding of terrorism, inspiring the discussion of "states through terrorism" and demonstrating that modern terrorism is globalized. However, the definition of modern terrorism is ever-changing due to technological advancements, and cyberterrorism may become the next paradigm shift.

Introduction

The origin of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can trace back to the late 19th century, more precisely, the 1880s, when Jewish immigration to Palestine increased significantly at that time.¹ While the Jewish people sought to establish their nation-state due to the

¹ Julie M. Norman, "Terrorism in Israel/Palestine." In *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*, edited by Richard English, 149-172. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 151.

growing Zionism, the Palestinians also had the same request to the British officials, which laid down the ongoing conflict until nowadays.² Any broad survey of Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be deficient without discussion of Terrorism. The Palestinian terrorism from the international aspect was the most notorious terrorism during the 1960s to 1970s, including hijacking, bombing and assassination. From some perspectives, the terrorism involved demands for the release of their terrorist members³, targeted to destroy the self-confidence of Israelis as well as the connection between Israel and its advocates.⁴ However, they were only the remote reasons that accelerated the appearance of Palestinian international terrorism, root causes are yet to be mentioned. Therefore, this essay aims to use a different perspective to interpret their terroristic actions. It will first touch upon the root causes, historical context and legitimating its claims to be the representative of the Palestinians, which led Palestinian nationalists to target objectives outside of Israel/Palestine. Then, turn to investigate their achievement based on the previous section and finally discuss their influence of understanding modern terrorism in terms of the possibility of establishing states by terrorism, and globalized terrorism.

The Root Causes for Nationalists Objectives outside of Israel/Palestine

Starting from historical context of Israel–Palestine relations, the perception of injustice from the western countries was pervasive among the Palestinians. The British Foreign Secretary expressed the support for the establishment of the Jewish State in Palestine in 1917, whereas, a similar promise had been made as well to the Palestinian people and Arab leaders in 1915 and 1916 for gaining their support in the combat with the Ottoman Empire.⁵ The Arabs, especially the Palestinians, expected the establishment of their own nation-state after World War I. However, their contribution was in the exchange of betrayal. The British government did not reach their promise. They planned to fulfil the aspirations of both Jews and Arabs, which was not in the expectation of the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 160.

⁴ Martin Jander, “German Leftist Terrorism and Israel: Ethno-Nationalist, Religious-Fundamentalist, or Social-Revolutionary?” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, No. 6 (2015): 466.

⁵ Julie M. Norman, 151.

Palestinians that they only wanted to create their own nation-state.⁶ The early form of terrorism happened as a response of the British betrayal.⁷ The situation went worse as the Palestinians thought they faced another unfair treatment on the partition plan for Palestine, which was made by United Nations, in 1947.⁸ The failure of the British government and United Nations made Israel/Palestine became closely associated with terrorism. Many terrorist organizations were set up by both the Israelis and the Palestinians such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, PLO and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, DFLP.⁹ They first implemented formal terrorism only in Israel and its periphery, but they started to target objectives outside of Israel, especially western countries, since the Six-Day War as they thought the Arab states could not secure the Palestinians and reach their ideal, which was to fend off the Israelis.¹⁰

A phenomenon can be observed from the development of Palestinian terrorism that it was a steadily increasing process, from the Israeli territory to the western countries, which supported Israel. Without the failure of the British government and the United Nations, the Palestinian nationalists would not implement terrorist attacks on western countries, with some reasons such as forcing attention to the Palestinian cause and how unfair the Palestinians was treated. When we take an overall view of the history of the conflict, the international terrorism from Palestinian nationalists was the continuative response to the injustice to the Palestinians and to the expression of their anger. Other reasons were supplementary factors that accelerated the appearance of their international terrorism. If the British official and the United Nations handle well in dealing the Israel-Palestine problem, try to have a consensus with both the Palestinians and Israelis, but not lean to the latter, it can minimize the soil for the development of terrorism among the Palestinians. However, the possibility of reaching this ideal remains uncertain. It involves other factors that international relations is complex, and

⁶ Ibid, 151-152.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 155.

⁹ Ibid, 157.

¹⁰ John A. Lynn II, *Another Kind of War: The Nature and History of Terrorism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019, 195.

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also western society held a more sympathetic view to the Jews than their counterparts at that time.

As mentioned above, many Palestinian nationalists created and joined different nationalist organizations in order to “emancipate” the Israeli territory. It suggests another root cause, strengthening the claim of their organization to be the only representative unit actor of the Palestinian people, for them to target overseas objectives. The orientation of the conflict shifted from Jewish-Palestinian to Israel-Arab since the establishment of Israel, which can be manifested by the several times of war between Israel and its periphery. It downplayed the role of the Palestinians in the conflict. Thus, the emergence of Palestinian nationalists’ organizations such as PLO was not just to resist Israel, but to seize back the leadership of the struggle for Palestine from the Arab countries.¹¹ They further realized, after the Six-Day War in 1967, that they could only regain the patrimony lost, mainly the land, by their own efforts.¹² However, it was insufficient to implement terrorism only in Israel and the Middle East for gaining worldwide attention and strengthening their legitimacy as the representative of the Palestinians. Therefore, groups, like the PFLP, within the PLO started to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in different places, mainly the western countries, since 1967 such as the hijacking of an Israeli EL AL plane on its way from Rome to Tel Aviv in 1968¹³ and a similar aircraft hijacking in 1969 at Zurich.¹⁴ The increasing scale of international terrorism means they recognized that they could reach their goal by putting civilians’ lives at stake, which led to the notorious Munich massacre in 1972 and other following terrorist attacks finally.¹⁵

¹¹ Julie M. Norman, 156.

¹² John A. Lynn II, 194-195.

¹³ Tobias Hof, “The Lodo Moro: Italy and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.” In *Terrorism in the Cold War: State Support in the West, Middle East and Latin America*, edited by Adrian Hänni, Thomas Riegler and Przemyslaw Gasztold, 153-173. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021, 154-155.

¹⁴ Marcel Gyr, “The Secret 1970 Moratorium Agreement between Switzerland and the PLO.” In *Terrorism in the Cold War: State Support in the West, Middle East and Latin America*, edited by Adrian Hänni, Thomas Riegler and Przemyslaw Gasztold, 63-87. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021, 63.

¹⁵ Boaz Ganor, “Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.” In *The Routledge History of Terrorism*, edited by Randall D. Law, 239-257. New York: Routledge, 2015, 245-246.

Being the representative of the Palestinians means they could have a kind of self-determination, due to the increase of their bargaining power, for the future of their ethnicity without severe intervention from the Arab world. The problem of legitimacy is crucial at any time, for example, the debate between PRC and ROC about their legitimacy in the United Nations in the early 1970s. If the ROC is still the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations, the world politics must be different. Stretching from the country level to the personal level, legitimacy is always regarded as a power tool. That was why the Palestinian nationalists were determined in gaining the right of representing all the Palestinians. Palestine for Palestinians is the supreme idea for the nationalists even until nowadays.

What did they Achieve?

These terrorist attacks created an image, without any suspicion, for the western countries that the only way to stop the violence was to reexamine their foreign policy to Palestine and start a conversation with the PLO. Regarding their aims from the previous section, apparently, some achievements were done because of their international terrorism. It was not a coincidence that the PLO chairman, Yasser Arafat, was invited to address the United Nations General Assembly eighteen months after the Munich Massacre.¹⁶ PLO was even accepted as a UN special Observer soon after.¹⁷ It implies that western society began to recognize the legitimacy of PLO as the representative of the Palestinians and treat the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a serious topic that the member of the UN had an obligation to find out the best solution to this conflict. The Palestinians started to be treated relatively fair in their eyes.

Besides the participation of international organization, the interaction between PLO and the European countries was another focal point. Official channels have been set up for conversations with PLO by western European countries. Italy supported PLO's diplomatic strategy by allowing the establishment of PLO office in Rome.¹⁸ The PLO

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 246-247.

¹⁸ Tobias Hof, 157.

office was officially opened in 1975 in Switzerland.¹⁹ Furthermore, sufficient evidence prove that PLO collaborated with Eastern bloc regimes such as Poland, Hungary, and Germany.²⁰ The international standing of the PLO reached an unprecedented high point compared to the early years of this organization. They began to be recognized as representing the will of Palestinians.

After experiencing a series of diplomatic negotiations, the Palestinian could have their autonomous state finally in Gaza and the West Bank according to the Oslo Accords and the Gaza and Jericho agreements in the 1990s, which was a historical landmark for the Palestinians at that time.²¹ The PLO, which was only a nationalists' organization that implemented terrorism widely from thirty years ago, had become the only representative of the Palestinians and the legal sovereign over their territory. The international terrorism from the Palestinian nationalist not only successfully took the leadership of struggle with Israel from the Arab leaders to themselves, but also made progress towards their ideal, the establishment of their nation-state. Their achievements cannot be underestimated.

Their Influence of Understanding Modern Terrorism

The terrorist attacks by Palestinian nationalists created a new vision in understanding what terrorism can achieve. Non-state terrorism was considered as barely an approach to express anger and hatred by a group of people, who were being oppressed, in the past. Significant change would barely happen due to the asymmetric power between states and citizens. For example, nothing had changed after Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb nationalist. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not because of Gavrilo Princip but the loss of World War I. However, the Palestinian experience proved that some political ends could be

¹⁹ Marcel Gyr, 69.

²⁰ Tobias Wunschik. "Palestinian Terrorism and the State Security of the GDR: Abu Nidal between East Berlin, Moscow, and Washington". In *Terrorism in the Cold War: State Support in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Sphere of Influence*, edited by Adrian Hänni, Thomas Riegler and Przemyslaw Gasztold, 61-83. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021, 62.

²¹ Boaz Ganor, 252.

achieved by terrorism. After a series of terrorist attacks, autonomous areas were established, and the legitimacy of the Palestinian nationalist organization, PLO, was consolidated.²² The illusion of “states through terrorism” was widespread to the world. It inspired other radical nationalists and their organizations, in which ISIS is a prominent example that shows the concept of “states through terrorism”. The discussion of the possibility of establishing state by terrorism is the derivative of their practices.

Moreover, the practices of Palestinian nationalists demonstrated that modern non-state terrorism is global terrorism. In the past, transnational terrorism was hard to achieve because of the limitation of transportation. The advance of transportation extended the range of implementing terrorism. Terrorist attacks from Palestinian nationalists were widespread, especially among western European countries during the 1960s to 1970s.²³ They regarded those attacks as the retaliation of the inequality between Israel and Palestine. This kind of “global” attacks was the pioneer of modern terrorism that the following terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS imitate the practices of PLO to target overseas objectives, which have led to many tragedies like the 9/11 incident and the November 2015 Paris attacks, for spreading fear and anxiety. Terrorist organizations even recruit members around the world by social media nowadays. It further proves that modern terrorism is globalized. People in different countries are now at risk of terrorism to various degrees due to the development of technology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Palestinian terrorism was being lingered by historical context and the issue of legitimacy. The injustice from the West and the legitimacy in representing Palestinians were the fundamental reasons for their international terrorism. While some achievements were made by Palestinian nationalists, they were at the cost of sacrificing many lives of ordinary people, which is an indisputable fact. Their practices further link to a moral question that “does the end justify the means?”. Besides the argument of morality, it is certain that they have changed the modern understanding of terrorism. It made people understand that modern terrorism is globalized, and

²² Ibid.

²³ Julie M. Norman, 159.

inspired the discussion of “states through terrorism”. However, the definition of modern terrorism is ever-changing because of technological advancement, more specific, the development of the internet. Cyberterrorism may substitute the “globalized” terrorism and cause a new understanding of terrorism in the future, which will lead to another paradigm shift.

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