

Guerrillas for Palestine

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CROOM HELM LONDON

PORTICO PUBLICATIONS

First published 1976
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Croom Helm Ltd,
2-10 St John's Road, London SW11

ISBN 0-85664-104-9

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Introduction

Since the October War, the world at large has shown a growing awareness of the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict and of the urgent need to restore peace to the Middle East after more than twenty-five years of antagonism and confrontation. Right at the heart of this conflict lies what has become known as the Palestine question. Now that a serious attempt is at last being made to bring about a solution to the conflict, it has become more abundantly clear than ever that any just and lasting peace must guarantee the rights and the future of the Palestinian people.

'The Palestine question' has of course been with us in one guise or another since World War One. It began to take on its present form as soon as the first refugees fled from the Jewish take-over of Palestine and the creation of the Jewish state of Israel. But a proper public recognition — however limited — of the human misery this exodus has involved is much more recent, and has had to wait on the emergence of the resistance movement in the wake of the 1967 war. It is no exaggeration to say that the identity of the Palestinian people has only been reasserted with the rise of the Palestinian guerrilla.

Guerrillas for Palestine is an examination of the commando phenomenon, and, more broadly, of the resistance movement as a whole. This book begins with a general account of the commandos' emergence as a force in the Middle East conflict, and moves to a description of the many groups, their various approaches to the problem and their relations with Arab and foreign states. The political apparatus of the resistance is treated in a separate section. The final section of the book gives profiles of the major personalities in the resistance movement.

Guerrillas for Palestine is based largely on contacts and interviews with the leaders and the theoreticians of the commando organizations, conducted by the Palestinian affairs specialists on the research staff of *An-Nahar Arab Report*.

1. The Rise of the Commandos

The emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement as a political force after 1967 was an event of revolutionary importance to the Arab world. Very rapidly the resistance was able to develop a standard of leadership, of organization and of mass popular support that marked it off from earlier efforts under the British mandate in Palestine, and indeed from most other political movements in the Arab world. It also acquired a military capability against Israel which, however modest, was still felt to be politically intolerable by the Israelis. Even more significantly to the Arab world, the resistance from the beginning posed a challenge to the traditional methods of confrontation with Israel followed by the Arab regimes involved in the conflict, thereby bringing into question their very authority and precipitating the grievous setbacks suffered by the movement at the hands of its supposed allies in 1970 and 1971.

Opposition between the Arab regimes and the resistance movement was inherent in the circumstances accompanying the movement's birth. There existed in the Palestinian community after the creation of Israel conditions more favourable to revolution than ever before in the Arab world. The Palestinians, their traditional society disrupted and their deprivation self-evident, were more susceptible to mobilization in a revolutionary cause than either their forbears under the mandate or their contemporaries elsewhere in the Arab Middle East. The extraordinarily high degree of education among the exiled community itself inspired a growing awareness of the injustice suffered, while the 1967 defeat convinced many Palestinians that the traditional leadership was bankrupt and a new departure should be made.

The behaviour of Israel was another powerful factor in the emergence of the resistance movement. Since 1948, Israel constituted a perpetual trauma in Arab politics, but after 1967 the occupation of significant portions of Egypt, Syria and

Jordan locked the neighbouring states irrevocably into the conflict with Israel. Henceforth there could be no question of relegating the Palestine question to second place in the concerns of the Arab world. The increased significance of Israel — and thus the Palestine problem — in the decision-making of Egypt, Jordan and Syria was inevitably reflected in a new political activism among the Palestinians themselves.

The growth of the Palestinian resistance movement marked the first attempt to find a new means of affirming Palestinian identity since the failure of the insurrection of the 1930s and the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948-9. Palestinian Arab politics under the early mandate had been dominated by loose alliances of religious, landed and commercial notables with little appreciation of modern political forces of organization. Under the pressure of continuous Jewish immigration, a more elaborate political structure began to appear in response to the sophisticated organization of the new adversaries. Political parties, like the *Istiqlal* and several regional, middle-class organizations, emerged as tentative expressions of nationalism, while families long influential in political affairs (such as the Husseinis and the Nashashibis) began to adopt more formal political structures. The Husseinis sponsored the Arab Palestine Party (*Al Hizb al Arabi al Filastini*) and the Nashashibis the National Defence Party (*Al Hizb al Difa' al Watani*).

But behind the cosmetics of Western-style politics, the Palestinian leadership retained its traditional bases of support. Hajj Amin al Hussein, the Grand Mufti, exploited the influence of the Supreme Muslim Council to dominate the national movement and the smaller bourgeois parties and groups. And it was Hajj Amin and his Arab Palestine Party who dominated the Arab Higher Committee, a coalition of six parties that tried to co-ordinate the unsuccessful rebellion of 1936-9. The new Palestinian organizations, either individually or as part of the Higher Committee, lacked a well-developed elite at an intermediate level that would permit them to mobilize popular support — although the small size of the country and the extensive connections of the leading families meant that they could lay claim to popular representation of

sorts. Nevertheless, the penetration of the community at large that they were able to achieve was necessarily limited and they remained essentially feudal in their organization.

The 1936-9 rebellion itself owed relatively little to the traditional political structures. Although undoubtedly widespread, involving thousands of fatalities and tying down a large British occupation force, it was basically a spontaneous and unco-ordinated peasant uprising. Indeed, the leading notables were against the insurrection at first. Hajj Amin was approached by one Izzedin al Qassem who requested appointment as a roving 'preacher' to prepare the way for the revolution. Qassem was rebuffed on the grounds that the Palestinians should be working for a political solution to their problem, but he went ahead undaunted and organized secret cells among the poorer workers and peasantry. On 14 November 1935 he fought his first battle against the British forces in the Jenin area, and was killed.

The rebellion he instigated, however, dragged on for more than three years, and although it was unable to achieve any of its major objectives, the mere fact that it took place outside the traditional family leadership in Palestine undoubtedly posed a major challenge to the feudal and bourgeois concept of Palestinian nationalism.

The chief weakness of the 1936-9 rebellion was the total absence of any unified and politically aware authority capable of giving direction to the insurrection. The traditional leadership was unable to fulfil this role in any proper sense, partly because many of its members were in exile, and partly because many others correctly perceived the threat the popular rebellion constituted to their position, with the result that they co-operated with the British. Even within the leadership, there was constant personal bickering between various personal interests among the feudal and bourgeois groups, who showed little hesitation in attacking the rebellion both by condemning it to the people and conducting negotiations with the mandatory authorities. The combatants themselves were ill-equipped against the occupying forces, and there was a minimum of co-operation between the various fronts. Gradually, the rebellion became weaker, and by the outbreak of

World War Two it had expired altogether.

The 1936-9 revolt demonstrated both the incapacity of the established nationalist movement to secure Palestinian Arab political rights (confirmed all the more strongly by the 1948-9 war) and severely undermined the Palestinians' ability to face the challenge of the creation of the Israeli state. Politically active Palestinians considered that the Arab governments were mainly responsible for the 1948-9 defeat: with the expiry of the mandate on 15 May 1949, the Arab states had taken on responsibility for the fight against Israel and had signally failed to make any impression. The exodus to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon effectively destroyed the traditional nationalist organization, such as it was, and until 1952 resurgent nationalist activity was paralysed by both the shock of defeat and expulsion and by the expectation of a United Nations settlement. In 1949 the UN had invited the refugees to return to Palestine, but the Israelis effectively opposed the move on the grounds that it would imperil the principle of a Jewish majority state.

The destruction of the traditional Palestinian social organization and the resulting political vacuum among the refugees, together with the resentment at the inefficiency and incapacity of the established Arab states, channelled Palestinian political energies into pan-Arab parties such as the Ba'ath and the Arab Nationalist Movement. With their stress on the unity of the Arab masses, such groups appealed to the widespread Palestinian conviction that the road to confrontation with Israel and the liberation of Palestine lay in a strong and unified Arab nation superseding the states that had emerged from the colonial era.

Until the Suez War of 1956, there was still no embryo of a national Palestinian organization. But the occupation of the Gaza Strip (the only part of Palestine that had not been formally annexed by Israel or Jordan) prompted the first nucleus of the future Fateh organization. Formed from students and politically conscious elements from a variety of social backgrounds who had come to the conclusion that the Palestinian people had no choice but to take their cause into their own hands, the movement made slow initial progress. It

identified itself with the tide of Nasserism, enthused with slogans of Arab unity and pan-Arab strength.

The theme of one Arab world was never so insistently promoted as in the decade before the 1967 war. Nor, ironically, has the bitter rivalry between Arab states ever been more acute. If the ideal of Arab unity struck a deep emotional chord among the population as a whole and provided the impetus for (and confused rivalry between) Ba'athists, Nasserites and Arab nationalists, the Palestinian national question and the continued existence of Israel made it possible for many an Arab government to redirect popular aspirations toward external objectives and an external enemy.

An initiative from new Palestinian nationalists was no more welcome to the established regimes than it had been to the established Palestinian leadership in the 1930s. Fateh leaders were accused by some Arab states of being agents of CENTO. The strict secrecy with which the various resistance movements surrounded themselves up to 1967 was not due so much to the Israelis as to the attitude of Arab regimes which subjected Palestinian militants to house arrest, prison and worse. Fateh still remembers that its first partisan casualty occurred at the hands of a Jordanian soldier in 1965.

The beginning of the 1960s witnessed two events that had a profound effect on Palestinian political thinking. In September 1961 Syria ruptured the union with Egypt in the United Arab Republic that had been the hallmark of Nasserite pan-Arabism. The demonstrable frailty of pan-Arab unity on a practical political level convinced those Palestinian activists who had seen the path to liberation along Nasserite lines (of an Arab nation in arms against Israel) that they could not wait until the rest of the Arab world pulled itself together. Now they began to think of liberation through independent Palestinian action and an independent Palestinian entity. As a result, more than 30 Palestinian organizations sprang up (most of which had only a small membership). And while this proliferation of organizations was ample evidence of the new trend in Palestinian thinking and a renewed enthusiasm to work seriously and independently for the liberation of the homeland,

it also reflected the lack of a strong and effective direction.

The second event to have a major effect on the course of the Palestinian revival was the eventual triumph of the Algerian revolution in 1962. This example of a successful popular war of liberation could only give more weight to the concept of independent Palestinian activity. The Algerians had been able to recruit material and moral support from various Arab regimes, and through armed struggle, attain their independence. The impact on many young Palestinian militants was understandably considerable.

Practically, the effect in Fateh was to shift the emphasis on to the formation of a military organization. Just as the years 1958 and 1961 had been spent in setting up the nucleus of a political structure, so from 1962 onwards the movement concentrated its efforts on the building of an effective military formation. The nucleus of Fateh gave rise to the nucleus of *Al Assifa* (The Tempest). But what above all decided Fateh to go over to the course of military action in preference to the path of political persuasion was the realization in the early 1960s that the movement was simply unable to bring sufficient political weight to bear that would affect the unfolding of developments in the Middle East.

The formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization by the Arab regimes was itself the result of growing unrest among Palestinian militants at the inaction of the established governments. Disillusionment with their reliance on 'progressive' Arab regimes for the fulfilment of their national ambitions had prompted the refugees to start organizing themselves politically and militarily. And now it was with some anxiety that the Arab governments faced the possibility of a gradual loss of control over the Palestinian movement, hitherto part and parcel of the 'pan-Arab' dream. The ineffectiveness of the regimes contrasted with the promise offered by the new organizations of concrete and violent measures against the Israelis, regardless of what the Arab governments might think about such action or do about the inevitable retaliatory blow from Israel.

The first summit of Arab kings and presidents took place in