

# **The Global Offensive**

THE UNITED STATES, THE PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION, AND THE  
MAKING OF THE POST – COLD WAR ORDER

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## **Introduction: Palestinian Liberation and the Dawn of the Post–Cold War Era**

On 28 March 1970, a Chinese military aircraft left the Beijing airport for Hanoi with a delegation of Palestinian liberation fighters that included Yasir Arafat, the chair of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and his deputy, Salah Khalaf. Although the two men had tried to attract as little attention as possible when they arrived—Arafat dressed in a conservative business suit rather than his trademark black and white kuffiyah—they were seen off by a crowd of thousands. The delegation arrived at Hanoi's heavily fortified Gia Lam Airport on the eve of a series of North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. and South Vietnamese positions that shattered the relative lull in fighting that had prevailed in the region over the previous eight months. After disembarking, Arafat and Khalaf were met by members of the Politburo and escorted into a reception room for several hours of discussion. During their two-week stay in North Vietnam, the Palestinians would tour factories, military bases, training camps, schools, and missile batteries and would enjoy an audience with General Võ Nguyen Giap, Hanoi's preeminent military strategist. "The Vietnamese and Palestinian people have much in common," Giap told the delegation, "just like two people suffering from the same illness."<sup>1</sup>

Giap was not the only leader thinking in these global terms. A few months later, President Richard Nixon sat down in a Los Angeles television studio—nearly eight thousand miles from Hanoi—for an interview with journalists from the three national networks. Nixon warned the millions of Americans who watched the broadcast that night that the critics who had begun to denounce as obsolete the domino theory—which argued that a communist takeover of one state was likely to lead to the overthrow of other governments in the region—had not "talked to the dominoes." The president explained that American success in South Vietnam could mean the difference between freedom and a communist takeover for millions of people throughout East Asia.



FIGURE 0.1 *Southeastern Mediterranean, map no. 4013, July 1997. Courtesy of the United Nations.*

Further, a communist victory in South Vietnam would surely encourage Moscow and Beijing to pursue their revolutionary ambitions in other parts of the world. The conversation then turned to the Middle East: “You cannot separate what happens to America in Vietnam from the Mideast or from Europe or any place else,” he explained. The Soviets were moving into the area, which was already torn by conflicts between Israel and its neighbors and between moderates and radicals in the Arab world. Making matters worse, there now appeared to be an even more revolutionary force in Arab politics, the Palestinian guerillas. Important as the struggle for Southeast Asia had been, Nixon warned at the end of the broadcast, the stakes and the dangers in the Middle East were even greater.<sup>2</sup>

Nixon, Arafat, and Giap each recognized that they were operating on a global field. While the Cold War superpowers worked to maintain and extend their influence in every region of the world, small states and guerilla groups sought to exploit a proliferating array of transnational

connections that crisscrossed the globe. For insurgents such as Arafat and Giap, these global networks presented new spaces to be infiltrated and contested; for leaders such as Nixon, they represented lines that must be defended. Though they were not the first to target this interstate terrain, Palestinian fighters—driven by necessity as much as design—would orchestrate a campaign to seize this transnational space using a revolutionary set of tactics and strategies never before seen in history.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, the PLO emerged as the world's first globalized insurgency and became a seminal influence on other rebellions in the following decades.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the United States, in its efforts to defend its front lines against insurgents such as the PLO, worked to strengthen its existing network of strategic relationships around the world. Ultimately, as the two sides fought over the physical and conceptual space that was Palestine, they helped to remake the art of revolution and the structure of global power in the late Cold War world and beyond.

This book traces the changing face of national liberation at the end of the twentieth century. It is a history of the PLO's formative years and the organization's impact on U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is also a history of the PLO's international strategies and their impact on the emerging international order of the 1970s. Palestinian guerillas launched an offensive on many fronts: they fought across the arid floodplains of the Jordan Valley and in the climate-controlled corridors of United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, amidst the modernist high-rises of West Beirut and inside the pressurized cabins of commercial jetliners. Palestinian cadres presented their credentials to communist leaders in both Moscow and Hanoi and were greeted by throngs of cheering supporters in the public squares of Beijing and East Berlin; the violence they unleashed touched upscale apartments in Paris as well as the blisteringly hot side streets of Khartoum. As Palestinian fighters made these crossings, as both guerillas and diplomats, they helped to transform the regional order in the Middle East and the shape of revolutionary politics in the wider world.

Accordingly, this book locates the Palestinian armed struggle within the broad complex of liberationist forces scattered throughout the international system of the Cold War world. Viewed from this perspective, the era's myriad insurrections, revolts, and rebellions appear not as discrete episodes but as a linked, and at times even coordinated, series of assaults on the structures of global power. They were part of a unique moment in history when it appeared as if progressive guerilla movements might seize control of the postcolonial world, in which more than 70 percent of the earth's population resided. More than just isolated reactions to local circumstances and superpower politics, these uprisings had in common a vision of revolutionary politics drawn from a shared culture of Third World national liberation.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that these movements were monolithic—indeed, a staggering diversity existed within their ranks over both time and space—but rather to draw attention to the many transnational connections, exchanges, and crossings that characterized national liberation. Guerilla fighters from Palestine, Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, and a dozen other locales can be understood as a sprawling constellation of revolutionary networks. Viewed from a distance, they appear as an international force in their own right, a global offensive against the bastions of state power in the Cold War system.

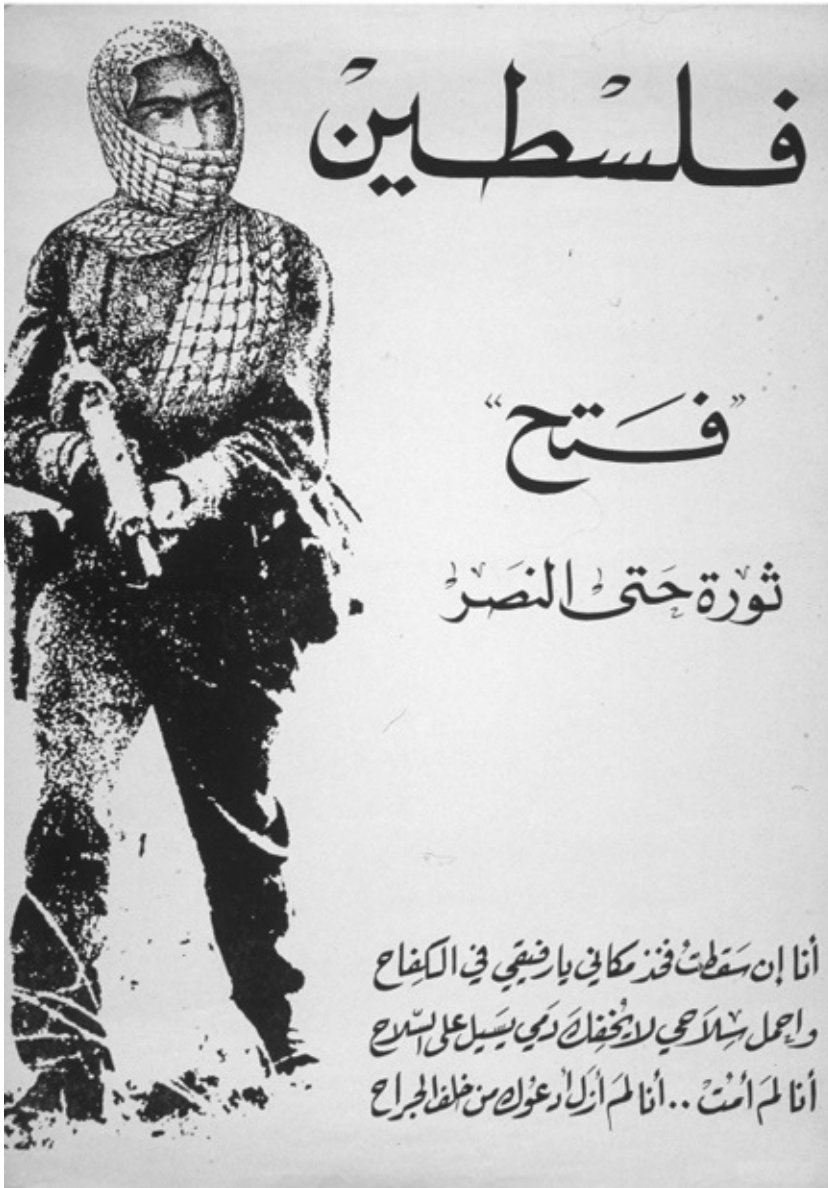


FIGURE 0.2 Fatah poster, "I Did Not Die," c. 1967. Courtesy of the Palestinian Poster Project Archives.

While Palestinian fighters recognized these global networks as a new field on which to wage their war of national liberation, U.S. policy makers came to understand this transnational terrain as a new front that had to be fortified. Victory in the Cold War, according to many in Washington, could not be achieved if the United States was in retreat throughout the global South. For the United States and its allies, holding the line on the Third World battlefields of the 1960s and 1970s would mean finding some way to halt the guerillas' advances. Thus, just as Cuban and Vietnamese fighters can be seen as comprising the western and eastern wings of a worldwide guerilla offensive, U.S. moves to contest the advance of national liberation movements from Latin America to Southeast Asia can be understood as part of a long campaign to win the Cold War in the Third World. These global dynamics came into play in every theater of the Cold War as the European empires of the pre-1945 world collapsed. In this way, policy makers in Washington came to understand the Cold War as a struggle for influence across physical, political, and conceptual battlefields in every region of the world.



Thus, the PLO's global offensive, which began in earnest in the Middle East in late 1967 and reached the world stage by the end of 1974, was only one front in this larger story. As Palestinian military and diplomatic operations unfolded on a series of four main stages concentrated on the cities of Nablus, Amman, Beirut, and Geneva, the guerillas emerged alongside Vietnamese and South African liberation fighters at the vanguard of the struggle of national liberation in the 1970s. These victories on the world stage would also help to make the PLO a key player in the Arab-Israeli dispute. During this same period, the U.S. government developed its official position on the PLO, which sought to balance the resurgence of Palestinian nationalism with evolving priorities in the region and the wider Cold War. In this way, the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations would move toward a policy of diplomatic containment of the PLO coupled with military suppression of the fedayeen — literally, “those who sacrifice themselves,” used to refer to the Palestinian guerilla fighters—at the hands of regional police powers. Thus, as Palestinian fighters gained ground in the international arena, the United States and its allies in the region reinforced their defenses.

Moving beyond the confines of the Israel-Palestine dispute, the PLO's global offensive carried a threefold significance in twentieth-century international history. The Palestinian experience of the 1960s and 1970s represented a watershed in the worldwide struggle for national liberation. As they tapped into the transnational culture of Third World liberation, Palestinian fighters became adept at traversing the revolutionary networks of the Cold War international system and became a cause célèbre for progressive movements around the world. By late 1973, Arafat could claim to have taken up “the banner of the global struggle” from the Vietnamese revolution, marking the passage to a new phase in the twentieth-century wars of decolonization.<sup>6</sup> As the “global struggle” moved from the jungles of Southeast Asia to the mountains, plains, and cities of the Middle East, however, its character changed. If the victory of Vietnamese communist forces in 1968–75 was one of the last great triumphs in a broader wave of postcolonial wars of national liberation, the Palestinian armed struggle during those same years can be seen as one of the first great stalemates. The PLO's experience thus marked the end of an era characterized by triumphant wars of national liberation around the global South and the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Third World. The global offensive straddled this divide—rather than produced it—and its fate would presage the balkanization of the Third World revolution in the coming decades.

This battle for Palestine marked a turning point in the global Cold War whereby guerilla campaigns throughout the developing world would confront a new configuration of U.S. power. As their position in Vietnam deteriorated in the face of a concerted guerilla assault, officials in Washington scrambled to find the means to reinforce U.S. commitments throughout the Cold War periphery; they struggled to produce a post-Vietnam containment strategy for the developing world of the 1970s and beyond. The Nixon Doctrine, as this new configuration came to be known, was designed to hold the line against the string of guerilla offensives around the developing world through the creation of a network of local police powers. At the same time, Washington established a defensive position in the chambers of the United Nations, where it sought to counter the tide of Third Worldism—an amorphous, left-leaning political movement among the developing nations that emphasized the North-South divide in international affairs and sought to create greater solidarity among the nations of the

postcolonial world—that was sweeping through the organization. Nowhere would these diplomatic and strategic transformations be more focused than in the Middle East, where the Nixon administration fortified its special relationship with Israel through enormous infusions of military aid and mobilized its veto power to shield its ally in the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger’s diplomatic approaches to the Arab-Israeli conflict worked to accomplish a power shift in the Arab world away from alignment with Moscow and toward a new relationship with Washington.

Finally, the contest between the PLO and the United States was one of a series of events that marked the beginning of what some commentators have called the age of globalization. At the same time that they navigated the worldwide revolutionary networks of the 1960s and 1970s and gained diplomatic support in international forums such as the United Nations, Palestinian fighters employed a new set of transnational guerilla tactics, which indicated the increasing power of nonstate actors in the international system and introduced the concept of “international terrorism” into the modern lexicon. In doing so, the PLO’s struggle signaled the beginning of a new age of security interdependence in which international cooperation, military partnerships, and stronger international organizations would be necessary to deal with increasingly global and transnational threats. This multilateralism was accompanied by a militant new unilateralism designed to combat the PLO’s global offensive. To this end, Israeli security forces developed an array of counterterrorism techniques that would provide a blueprint for the special forces operations of the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the PLO’s war would have more in common with the types of conflicts that would break out at the turn of the twenty-first century than with the battles of the Cold War era.

Although this book is first and foremost a study of the United States and the Palestinian liberation struggle in the late 1960s and 1970s, its arguments engage in broader debates about international history, the Cold War, decolonization, and U.S. foreign relations. Until recently, international history was all but synonymous with the history of the great powers. Local peoples and states were minor participants in a story dominated by the architects of empire, little more than aspects of the terrain over which the policies of Western statesmen moved. In this version, the great powers served as the “driving force of history,” while “indigenous actions [were reduced] to mere strategies of subversion and survival.”<sup>7</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, the picture becomes more complicated: these actors exercised a considerable amount of power and harbored their own ambitions; they crafted their own grand strategies and advanced their own foreign policies.<sup>8</sup>

Thus in recent years, historians of foreign relations have moved beyond their traditional focus on the making of state policy in Western capitals, working to incorporate local actors as fully rendered agents in the making of the contemporary world order. Far from being merely supporting players on a stage dominated by presidents and prime ministers, indigenous non-Western peoples were active participants in the complex set of negotiations that created the modern world. This new scholarship endeavors to treat their agency not as the background to the real drama unfolding in places such as Washington and Moscow but rather as an essential component of a genuinely international story. It recognizes that the history of the Cold War in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and Africa is inseparable from the history of the states and peoples that constitute those regions.