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The PLO and Its Factions

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Summary

During the current Palestinian uprising, several Palestinian factions apparently linked in varying degrees to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) have used violence in an effort to force Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territory. There is a debate over the degree to which PLO Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Yasir Arafat is willing and able to prevent anti-Israel violence by these factions. This report will be updated to reflect regional developments. See also: CRS Issue Brief IB92052, *Palestinians and Middle East Peace: Issues for the United States*.

Background on the PLO and Yasir Arafat

Yasir Arafat was born Mohammad Abd Ar-Raouf on August 24, 1929, in Jerusalem. While studying in Egypt in 1944, he founded the League of Palestinian Students, and later earned an engineering degree from King Fuad University in Egypt. Arafat served in the Egyptian army as a demolition specialist during the 1956 Suez war between Egypt and Britain, France, and Israel. In 1957, Arafat helped founded the Fatah (Conquest) guerrilla organization, also known as the Palestine National Liberation Movement. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formally established in 1964, and Fatah joined it in 1968, immediately becoming its dominant organization. In 1969, Arafat was named PLO executive chairman. The Palestine National Council (PNC) is the highest decisionmaking body of the PLO, and is considered to be the “parliament”¹ of all Palestinians inside and outside the occupied territories. The PNC “sets PLO policies,” according to the website of the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations.² Arafat is also known as Abu Amar.

¹ Although the PLO describes the PNC as a parliament, the PNC should not be confused with the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC), the legislature of the Palestinian Authority, which represents only the residents of the West Bank and Gaza. Elections for the PLC were held in January 1996.

² The website is located at: [<http://www.palestine-un.org>].

Neither the PLO as a whole, nor the Fatah movement, has been named by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The PLO formally renounced the use of terrorism in 1988 and committed itself to peace with Israel in several agreements since 1993.³ (The FTO list is maintained by the State Department under the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, P.L. 104-132, and the State Department can add or delete a group from that list at any time.)

A number of different groups have been part of the PLO coalition; these groups have their own prominent founders and their own organizational structures. Some of the leaders of these PLO constituent groups have, at times, been rivals or competitors of Arafat for support among Palestinians. Several are considered “rejectionist” groups, having opposed the September 13, 1993 Israel-PLO mutual recognition and subsequent Israeli-Palestinian interim agreements. Major groups, apart from Fatah, have included:

- the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a Marxist group which suspended its participation in the PLO after the 1993 Israel-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (Israel-PLO mutual recognition, agreement to seek a peaceful settlement). It was founded by George Habash.
- the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), led by Ahmad Jibril, a Damascus based faction that is politically close to Syria. It also suspended its participation in the PLO.
- The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), led by Nayif Hawatmeh, also a Marxist organization that resumed participation in the PLO in 1999.
- the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), a small group, led by Abu Abbas, that is still participating in the PLO.

Three of these groups – the PFLP, the PFLP-GC, and the PLF – have claimed responsibility for acts of terrorism since the 1993 Declaration of Principles and are named by the State Department as FTO’s.⁴ The DFLP was named as an FTO when the first FTO list was issued in October 1997, but, because of a degree of reconciliation with Arafat and apparent acceptance of eventual peace with Israel, it was dropped when the list was revised in October 1999.

Minor groups in the PLO coalition – none of which is named as an FTO – are: As-Saiqa, a pro-Syrian faction not currently participating in the PLO; the Arab Liberation Front, a pro-Iraqi faction that is participating in the PLO; the Popular Struggle Front, which is participating in the PLO; the People’s Party, formerly called the Palestinian

³ For further information on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, see CRS Issue Brief IB92052, *Palestinians and Middle East Peace: Issues for the United States*, and CRS Issue Brief IB91137, *The Middle East Peace Talks*.

⁴ These groups, as well as other Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, are discussed in greater depth in CRS Report RL31119, *Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors, 2002*. The penalties for being named an FTO are discussed in that report.

Communist Party and which is participating in the PLO; and the Democratic Union, commonly known by its initials "FIDA," a splinter faction of the DFLP which is participating in the PLO.

The PLO's Islamist Rivals: Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Most of the anti-Israel violence since the 1993 Declaration of Principles and during the current Palestinian uprising has been conducted by Islamist groups – notably Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Both of these groups are named as FTO's. Neither has ever been part of the PLO coalition, and the two groups have been widely considered opponents of Arafat and the PLO. Hamas and PIJ reject the PLO's secular ideology and stated commitment to reaching a peace deal with Israel. On the other hand, Arafat and the two Islamist groups have occasionally sought to forge closer ties to each other. In June 2002, Arafat reportedly offered the two organizations seats in the PA cabinet, but they both refused, saying they could not serve in a government that is committed to reaching a peace deal with Israel.

Major PLO Groups and Factions Involved in the Uprising

During the current Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000, violence and terrorism against Israelis have been conducted not only by Hamas and PIJ, but also by factions related to the PLO, and Fatah in particular. This development has shifted the focus of the debate over the PLO somewhat. Previously, U.S. official statements and reports on PLO compliance with its commitments to Israel, which are submitted to Congress every six months in reports pursuant to Title VIII of P.L. 101-246, the PLO Commitments Compliance Act, primarily assessed Arafat's willingness and ability to constrain terrorist activities by his rivals, Hamas and PIJ. In contrast, much of the current U.S. discussion of Arafat's goals and motives focuses on his willingness and ability to prevent anti-Israel violence and terrorism by PLO/Fatah-related factions that have traditionally been considered his allies or subordinates. Some of these factions, particularly the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, are increasingly using suicide tactics that traditionally have been characteristic of Hamas and PIJ.

There are four major PLO-related organizations and factions that have attracted recent Administration and congressional interest for their relatively high level of involvement in anti-Israel violence during the current uprising. They are: Fatah itself, Arafat's key power base within the PLO; Force-17, a PLO security service; and two Fatah offshoots – the Tanzim (Arabic word for "organization"), and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades was designated an FTO on March 27, 2002; Fatah, Force 17, and the Tanzim have not been designated as FTO's.

The Administration's PLO compliance report of May 7, 2002, covering the period June 16, 2001 to December 15, 2001, and the State Department report on international terrorism for 2001 (*Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, released May 21, 2002) discuss the involvement of PLO-related groups factions in anti-Israel violence. The PLO compliance report states that "...available evidence indicates that elements with varying degrees of affiliation with the PLO, specifically the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Tanzim, Force 17, and members of other security forces, were frequently involved in acts of violence against Israelis." The report adds that, "While there is no conclusive evidence that these elements acted with the prior approval and encouragement of the PLO and PA (Palestinian Authority) leadership, it is clear that these armed elements were not

disciplined.” The *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report cited above (P.54) states that members of the Tanzim and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade conducted attacks against Israeli targets in 2001. The Administration’s previous report on PLO compliance, which covered the period December 15, 2000 - June 15, 2001, said that “some elements of the PA security forces and Chairman Arafat’s Fatah faction within the PLO were deeply involved in the violence” against Israelis. That report added that “Mid-level PA and Fatah officials, including of the Tanzim, have publicly advocated violence.”

The following is background on the four PLO-related groups and factions.

Fatah. Fatah, as noted above, is Arafat’s core power base within the PLO, and the faction over which Arafat, a key Fatah founder, presumably has the most control. Fatah’s founders were, like Arafat, Palestinians students in Egypt during the 1950s. Upon completing their studies, many, including Arafat, went to the Persian Gulf states to avoid the politically repressive atmosphere of Egypt under Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Fatah’s founders emphasized their own Palestinian nationalist ideology more than Nasser’s Arab nationalist ideology and conducted cross-border guerrilla activity against Israel from Jordan and Lebanon. According to the Palestinian U.N. website, in the mid 1970s (after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war) Fatah led the “pragmatic transition toward engagement in a political settlement” with Israel.

Force 17. Force 17 was formed in the early 1970s as a personal security force for Arafat and other PLO leaders. Force 17 members were involved in attacks on Israeli targets in the early 1980s and it claimed responsibility for killing three Israelis in Cyprus in 1985. In 1994, when the PA was established, Force 17 was merged into the official PA security apparatus and technically ceased to exist, although some PA security officials apparently continue to identify themselves as Force 17 members. It is widely presumed that Arafat has a degree of control over Force 17 because it is part of the PA security structure. Those members of Force 17 who are allegedly involved in violence against Israel do not appear to have a clearly identifiable leadership apart from Arafat.

The Tanzim. The Tanzim militia is widely considered an armed offshoot of Fatah, but it has developed its own structure and leadership. For that reason, Arafat’s influence over the Tanzim is probably less extensive than within Fatah or Force 17. The acknowledged head of the Tanzim is Marwan Barghouti, who is the secretary-general of Fatah in the West Bank and, according to some accounts, is increasingly viewed as a potential successor to Arafat.⁵ At the same time, Barghouti has publicly praised Arafat as an effective Palestinian leader and has said, in editorials written in U.S. newspapers, that Palestinian violence is for the purpose only of ending Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories, and not to destroy Israel. The precise relationship between Arafat and Barghouti is not known. Barghouti says he “still seek[s] peaceful coexistence between the equal and independent countries of Israel and Palestine based on full withdrawal from Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 and a just resolution to the plight of Palestinian refugees pursuant to U.N. resolutions.”⁶ Barghouti, who is about 42 years old, has been incarcerated by Israel since Israeli forces arrested him in mid-April 2002

⁵ Kifner, John. As Arafat Critics Close In, Deputies Vie in the Wings. *New York Times*, May 21, 2002.

⁶ Barghouti, Marwan. Want Security? End the Occupation. *Morning Star*, January 31, 2002.

during their military incursion into the Palestinian territories. Barghouti was a student activist at Bir Zeit University in the 1980s, and was imprisoned by Israel for six years (1982-1988) for Fatah activities. He was deported to Jordan in 1988 and returned to the West Bank in 1994 under the terms of the Oslo accords.

The Tanzim militia was established in 1995 by Arafat and the Fatah leadership as a paramilitary force intended to offset the power of the Palestinian Islamist groups, particularly Hamas and PIJ. Fatah's decision to form the Tanzim was apparently motivated, at least in part, by armed confrontations in 1994 between PA security forces and members of Hamas. The Tanzim is also a grass roots organization that operates at the community level and, by taking a hardline position toward Israel, it has helped siphon Palestinian support from the Islamist groups to the PA and PLO leadership. Since the latest Palestinian uprising began, it has reportedly been involved in firing on Israeli soldiers during Palestinian demonstrations, and some mortar attacks on Israeli settlements. According to available information, the Tanzim has not conducted suicide bombings against Israelis, perhaps explaining why it has not been designated an FTO.

Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Of the PLO-related organizations discussed in this section, the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, is the only one named as an FTO. It has been so designated on the grounds that it has claimed responsibility for carrying out suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. The Brigades appears to have sprung up spontaneously, after the start of the latest Palestinian uprising, reportedly formed by Tanzim or other Fatah activists who believe in a more aggressive approach to forcing Israel to end its occupation. Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades members say they do not share the ideology of Hamas and PIJ, which purport to seek Israel's destruction. Brigades members say they are interested in a peace process as long as a final settlement results in Israel's full withdrawal from the occupied territories and provides for the right of return of Palestinian refugees.⁷

The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades does not have a well defined structure and, of the factions discussed in this section, is the one over which Arafat would appear to have the least political control. There is no firm evidence that Arafat selected any leaders or commanders of the Brigades or specifically authorized its formation. According to some press reports, commanders of the Brigades frequently take issue with Arafat, and Arafat's representatives are constantly debating Palestinian strategy and tactics with the Brigades.⁸ On the other hand, some point to statements by Martyrs Brigades commanders and PA officials as supporting the argument that the Brigades are under Arafat's control. One Brigades commander told a journalist in March 2002 that "Our group is an integral part of Fatah."⁹ Other analysts quote a senior Fatah leader, Hussein al-Sheikh, as saying that Fatah controls the Brigades "to one extent or another."

⁷ Biedermann, Ferry. Secular and Deadly: The Rise of the Martyrs Brigades. Salon.com, March 19, 2002.

⁸ Williams, Daniel. A Magnet for Palestinian 'Martyrs;' Al Aqsa Brigades Lead New Wave of Attacks on Israeli Civilians. *Washington Post*, March 7, 2002.

⁹ Kalman, Matthew. Terrorist Says Orders Come From Arafat. *USA Today*, March 14, 2002.

Conclusions and Prospects

It is not possible from publicly available information to determine the exact extent to which Arafat is able to or has sought to control Palestinian factions that use violence. During its incursion into the West Bank in April 2002, Israel claimed to have captured Palestinian documents purporting to demonstrate Arafat's backing for terrorism by some of these factions. The Palestinians say that the documents are either forged or have been misrepresented by Israel. U.S. government agencies have not made a public assessment of these documents to date. Arafat has denounced suicide terrorism against Israel after terrorist events, and the U.S. government reports cited above do not publicly corroborate or support Israeli allegations that Arafat himself has authorized acts of terrorism against Israelis. On the other hand, U.S. officials, including President Bush, have repeatedly criticized Arafat since January 2002 for failing to do all he could to prevent anti-Israel violence. Those who believe Arafat is actively supporting violence and terrorism against Israel assert that Arafat feels that violence can be a useful tactic in forcing concessions from Israel, or perhaps even precipitating Israel's demise. Others argue that terrorist acts are counterproductive for Arafat since they undercut his credibility as a negotiating partner.

Some in Congress believe that the United States should, among other steps, specifically sanction the PLO and some of its factions. Section 4 of H.R. 1795, the Middle East Peace Commitments Act of 2001, introduced by Representative Ackerman, Representative Gilman, and Representative Lantos on May 10, 2001, directs the President to "designate the PLO, or one or more of its constituent groups (including Fatah and Tanzim) or groups operating as arms of the Palestinian Authority (including Force 17)" as an FTO. A companion bill, S. 1409, was introduced in the Senate by Senator McConnell on September 6, 2001. Opponents of the legislation believe that naming Fatah, the Tanzim, or Force 17 as terrorist groups would indicate that the United States no longer views Arafat as a legitimate Palestinian peace interlocutor, and damage prospects for a peaceful solution to the violence.