

NEW DIMENSIONS OF THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION: CONTRADICTIONS IN ARAB ATTITUDE

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It has been an irony that the Palestinians rejected a homeland when it was offered to them, but when ultimately they accepted it two and a half decades later, they found themselves in the midst of serious difficulties. The reason for their not accepting in 1947 the UN Palestine partition plan was that the land belonged to the Palestinian Arabs, and they believed that the UN had no right to partition it or make any of its parts a settlement of an alien people. For 20 years the Palestinians, along with other Arabs, maintained this position. Then in June 1967, Israel's sweeping victory over the Arabs had such a telling effect on the problem that a new chapter in the Arab-Israeli conflict began, with the Arabs showing their readiness to accept the existence of the State of Israel, and confining themselves to what they called "removing the traces of Israeli aggression of June 1967".

In the beginning, the Palestinians did not agree to this Arab position. But when they reconciled with it at the end of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, they found that their principal adversary, Israel, was still persistent in its refusal to recognize them as an independent entity. Their Arab supporters, not yet recovered from the spell of June 1967 defeat, displayed eagerness to confine their bargaining to the post-June 1967 position and were lukewarm towards the Palestinian aspirations. The UN too was helpless.

The purpose of this study is not to discuss the dimensions of the Palestinian problem at different stages of its history, but rather to confine itself to the developments that took place in the wake of the October 1973 War, and a way out that this war showed to the Arabs, including the Palestinians, from the impasse of June 1967 defeat. Here it should be noted at the outset that the Palestinians had to start from a much weaker position

even in the group of Arab countries having common borders with Israel, with whom the life-line of the Palestinian resistance movement was closely connected. This was for two important reasons.

One reason was that the October 1973 War was not of Palestinian or—to be more specific—of the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) making, and as such they had no role to play in the formation of the framework in which the war was fought and its subsequent results. In other words, the PLO, as a representative organization of the Palestinians, still lacked the field strength of a guerrilla movement for directly influencing the course of events that followed the war. Barring a few small Palestinian groups, who rejected the peace-policy of the Arab states altogether, and who do not come under the purview of this study, the PLO tried to make itself agreeable to the framework of the Arab front-line states who fought the war and kept the key for the solution of the Middle East Conflict in their hands. Obviously the PLO saw no way out from taking this course of action.

The second reason was that despite the fact that the PLO had been trying to get the Palestinian identity as a nation recognized, the Palestinian problem as it existed after the Arab-Israeli war in June 1967 was seen only as a refugee problem. It was envisaged in the Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967, which sought to make peace among the warring states of the region under the UN supervision and solve what it termed as "the refugee problem". This resolution was first accepted by two of the three states in direct confrontation with Israel, namely Egypt and Jordan, implying thereby that they also accepted the nature of the Palestinian problems as envisaged in the resolution. The third state, Syria, accepted this position later in March 1972.¹ It was reapproved by all the three states with their acceptance of Resolution 338 of the Security Council under which ceasefire was arranged between the warring parties in October 1973.

1 See President Hafez Assad's speech on the anniversary of 8 th March 1963 Revolution, as broadcast live by Damascus Home Service, in *SWB* (ME/3936), 10 March 1972, p. A/3.

PLO gains recognition

What brought a radical change in this position was the acceptance of a status of representative of the Palestinian people for the PLO by the Arab Summit Conference held in Algiers in November 1973. The Conference in a resolution expressed the commitment of the Arab states to the "restoration of the national rights of the Palestinian people in accordance with the decision of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in its capacity as the sole representative of the Palestinian people".² This was basically aimed at legitimizing the PLO's position as an independent party to the conflict with Israel, and bringing it at par with the other Arab states in so far as the solution of the conflict was concerned. Though the fact remained that the then existing resolutions of the Security Council did not accept this position of the Palestinians, nevertheless the decision by the Arab states to the contrary created a new situation and gave the Palestinian problem a new dimension, as it brought a new element in the efforts to solve the conflict.

Well aware of its implications the Arab states seeking peaceful settlement showed caution. They knew that no other framework for the efforts at settlement existed except Resolution 242 which, besides seeking solution of other issues that existed prior to June 1967, limited the scope of efforts at a solution of the conflict to the problem arising as a result of the June 1967 War. Here emerged a basic difference between the PLO position and that of the Arab states seeking peace with Israel. Whereas the Arab states wanted a solution based on Israeli withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied in June 1967, the PLO was sticking to a position which was incompatible with that of Israel. Again, besides Israel, who unequivocally and resolutely refused to recognize the PLO as a party to the conflict, there was a third

² This was contained in the secret resolutions of the conference. Its secrecy was maintained obviously in an attempt to avoid embarrassment for Jordan and other confrontation states. These resolutions were first published by *Al-Nahar*, and their English translation was reproduced by the *Arab World Weekly*, 8 December 1973. Also after the closing session of the Summit, the Secretary-General of the Arab League Mahmoud Riadh, announced in a press conference that the Algiers Summit had adopted a resolution reaffirming that the Palestine Liberation Organization was the only representative of the Palestinian people. *Algiers Home Service* on 28 November, monitored by *SWB* (ME/4464), 30 November, 1973, p. A/4.

country, the USA, very much sought after by the Arabs to mediate between them and Israel, who saw in the PLO an identical force emerging on the Middle East horizon demanding a separate state for itself and a potential danger for its interest in the area. Then there was Jordan, hitherto a part of the Arab group of states in direct confrontation with Israel, demanding the evacuation of what it called a territory legally under its control at the time of Israeli occupation in June 1967. This state was to be greatly affected by the decision of the Algiers Summit Conference that made the PLO the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Here again the PLO position became incompatible with that of Jordan, as both of them were demanding their sovereignty over the same area.

However, despite these odds, there was not a single party concerned with the conflict, including Israel, that did not want a solution of what in general terms was called the "Palestinian problem". In fact, it was this unique situation that essentially necessitated some decision making on the part of the Arabs when a stage was set for efforts at a peaceful solution of the conflict after the end of October 1973 War. The Israeli solution, as was being promoted by it after June 1967, became out of tune just after the war, and its efforts concentrated on retaining as much of its earlier position as was possible under the changed Middle East and international situations. As for Jordan, the Arabs were not agreeable when King Abdullah annexed the West Bank to Jordan in April 1950. Again, there were strong protests and condemnation all over the Arab world when King Hussein announced his plan for the establishment of the United Arab Kingdom in March 1972. Also there was a general unhappiness on Jordan's campaign to eliminate the Palestinian commandos in Jordan during 1970-71, and its role during the 1973 War. On the other hand, due to the greater organizational abilities of the PLO and the impact it was capable of making on the world opinion since the organization acquired new turn in 1968, a trend was emerging in the Arab world to give it greater responsibility. Algeria seemed to be at the forefront of this trend.

Algiers backs PLO

In the Arab East, the PLO was under heavy pressure and restriction for its operation in the countries having common bor-

der with Israel, while other countries were paying merely lip service to what they called the Palestinian cause, and exploiting it in their rivalries with other states in the area. But the West, Algeria in particular, had a different tradition that sought to support the Palestinians as the focal point of their policy towards the Middle East conflict. Ever since their independence the Algerians have been showing great appreciation of the guerrilla movements in Africa and Asia, and in that framework they developed a relationship with the PLO that enhanced their prestige in the Arab East and provided them with a greater leverage in their affairs which otherwise would have been difficult to acquire, and also with more weightage in the Arab West. This explains why they championed the Palestinian cause in other arenas when their role was curtailed in the actual zone of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Algeria was the only Arab country which systematically promoted the idea of giving the PLO a responsible position and also favoured the recognition of the Palestinians as an independent party to the Middle East settlement. As early as in October 1970, in a speech at the UN General Assembly during a debate on the Middle East, the Algerian representative explicitly presented his country's position *vis-à-vis* the Middle East question by saying that the discussion of the Middle East would be constructive only if it led the General Assembly to recognize the basic element, i. e., the Palestinian people and their legitimate and inalienable rights to the liberation of their country and to self-determination. He said that it was with the Palestinians first and last, that a solution could be found to the Middle East crisis, pleading that "the freedom fighters are intransigent in their struggle when their rights are ignored and flouted, but they are always ready to undertake realistic, serious and constructive dialogue when their inalienable and legitimate rights are recognized."³ Afterwards, this theme was repeatedly emphasized by the Algerian officials. For example, at a press conference in Paris on 11 July 1973, on a question why the Arabs did not want to negotiate with Israel, Abdel Aziz Boutaflika, the Algerian Foreign Minister, hinted towards this direction by saying that "the Israelis have before them acceptable negotiators who are the

3 A/PV. 1887, 28 October 1970, p. 5.

leaders of the Palestinian resistance".⁴ Again, Algeria seemed to be mainly instrumental in moving the Non-aligned Summit Conference held in Algiers (5-9 September 1973) to include a paragraph in its resolution on the Middle East, calling to recognize "the Palestine Liberation Organization as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in its just struggle."⁵

Despite the practical difficulties involved in giving the same position to the PLO by the Arab confrontation states, there were other aspects of the issue favourable to the PLO. When in April 1950, Jordan annexed parts of Palestine on the West Bank which were under its administration since the Armistice Agreement of 1949, the Arab League disapproved this act and in a resolution adopted on 13 April 1950 the League Council decided that "Palestine should be handed over to its owners so that they may rule it in the way they wish".⁶ From one angle it was a beginning of the question of Palestinian representation on which the Arab league took a decision in favour of the Palestinian entity against the wishes of the Jordanian Government. From another angle it was a major confrontation between the Arab League and Jordan, a member-state, while all the rest of the member-states took the stand against the Jordanian action. However, a compromise between the two sides was reached under which the Jordanian Government declared its undertaking that the annexation of the part of Palestine in question was a measure necessitated by practical considerations; that Jordan would hold that part in trust until a final settlement of the Palestinian question was reached; and that Jordan would accept in regard to it whatever might be unanimously decided by the other member-states.⁷ Henceforth, these Arab states would be responsible for constantly reviving the emotional attachment of the Arab public with the issue. Therefore, when the argument would have been forwarded in the Arab Summit Conference at Algiers (November 1973) that the PLO be made the sole representative of the Palestinian people,

4 For excerpts of Boutaflika's speech, see the *Arab World Weekly*, 14 July 1973, p. 20.

5 IVth Conference of Heads of States of Non-Aligned Countries (Algiers, 1973), *Fundamental Texts* (n. d.), p. 38.

6 Cited in Hussein A. Hassauna, *The League of the Arab States and Regional Disputes* (Oceana Publications, Inc. 1975), p. 34.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

thus automatically uprooting Jordan from the arena, the Arab frontline states would have found it difficult to oppose the plea. In fact, the issue of the Palestinian representation was brought up before the Conference with a view to decide the status of the West Bank of River Jordan in the context of King Hussein's proposal on 15 March 1972 for the creation of a federal Jordanian Palestinian state to be called the United Arab Kingdom.

With the Algiers Arab Conference adopting a definite stand on the question of who represents the Palestinians, the inherent Jordanian-Palestinian contradiction came to surface with full swing, and before it could involve their common adversary, Israel, the Arab dilemma began.

The majority of the PLO group of guerrilla movements encouraged by the success of the Arabs in reopening the Palestine question, thought that there existed an opportunity for them which they should avail of. They were also apprehensive that in case they did not co-operate with the Arab states seeking peace with Israel, the West Bank would be reverted back to Jordan and they would be completely isolated. They knew that the most they were supposed to get under any possible peace settlement was even less than what they were offered 27 years ago under the UN resolution for the partition of Palestine. They would also have understood that by accepting to rule the West Bank and other parts of the evacuated Palestinian areas they could not escape the responsibilities laid down under the provisions of future peace settlement between the Arabs and Israel. This would mean giving up the goals and objectives – in part, if not in full – the PLO had set for itself.

To face this situation, the organization outlined what it termed as “tactical goal” and “strategic goal” to be achieved in two stages of the struggle. It emphasized that it was committed to its “strategic goal” of establishing a secular and democratic state in all parts of undivided Palestine, but to achieve the “tactical goal” it should be ready to establish Palestinian sovereignty over the areas evacuated by Israel. Under this cover the Palestinians accepted, for the first time after the establishment of Israel, the idea of establishing what they called the “Palestinian National Authority” only in one part of the former Palestine, and showed their readiness to participate in efforts of the Arab

confrontation states for peaceful solution of the Middle East conflict. The PLO published a "working paper" on 20 February 1974 which defined the "Palestinian national objective" at that stage of its struggle" in the light of the facts of Arab and international situation", declaring: "The only alternative to occupation and to Jordanian guardianship is Palestine national sovereignty over these territories and declaration of national independence on any piece of land liberated from occupation."⁸

Jordan-PLO Conflict

On the other hand, Jordan strongly resented the Algiers Summit decision. But King Hussein in an attempt to placate the unfavourable Arab opinion tried to demonstrate that the annexation of the West Bank by Jordan was a mistake. At the same time he reserved for himself the right to represent the Palestinians in a territory that was captured by Israel when it was in Jordan's hand. In a speech from the Throne on 1 December 1973, opening a new session of the Jordan National Assembly, the King offered the Palestinians three choices: (1) stay with Jordan; (2) join it in a federation; (3) separate from it in a plebiscite under the UN supervision.⁹ The King also sent emissaries to the concerned Arab states in a bid to get their co-operation in establishing a dialogue with the PLO "in order to co-ordinate stand before the proposed peace conference on the Middle East". Meanwhile, Jordan strongly moved not to let the PLO replace it. The King in a calculated move explained his position regarding his participation in peace efforts to the Soviet and American Ambassadors in Amman, saying: "Either Jordan should be the country directly concerned in ensuring Israeli withdrawal from the

8 *Voice of Palestine* (Cairo), on 19 February 1974, monitored by SWB (ME/4532), 21 February 1974, p. A/1. This working paper was drafted and approved by Fatah, Syrian sponsored Al-Saiqa and the Popular Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) under George Habash, PFLP-General Command under Ahmed Jibril and the Iraqi-supported Arab Liberation Front (ALF) which rejected the idea of partial establishment of a Palestinian authority under a peace settlement that was being negotiated by the Arab confrontation states. This latter group was called the rejectionist group" and the division between this group and the other under Yassir Arafat was clearly established at the time of the publication of the working paper.

9 King Hussein's speech from the Throne (excerpts) relayed by *Amman Home Service*, 1 December 1973, p. A/2.

West bank to be followed by a UN supervised plebiscite for Palestinian people or this responsibility be passed on to the PLO or the Palestine Government in exile, in which case we in Jordan would be free from every commitment or responsibility".¹⁰

The Arab Dilemma

So long as the Arabs wanted a solution under Resolution 242, Jordan was of prime importance for the Arab confrontation states and it would always remain difficult to ignore that country. As the situation existed, Jordan had a long border with Israel, and the Palestinians remained an unrecognized identity, with their participation in future peace-talks uncertain. Besides, the PLO was adopting a definite view of peace with Israel not altogether similar to that of the other front line states. Apprehensive of the implications of Jordan's withdrawal from the scene, the influential Arab leaders were trying for reconciliation between Jordan and the PLO in a way that could lead to Jordan's participation in peace efforts. It was first demonstrated by the joint appeal the Arab Summit Conference in Algiers issued to King Hussein inviting him to come to the conference. The King had stubbornly refused to attend the conference in view of the Arab approach to the PLO. King Feisal of Saudi Arabia reportedly telephoned the Jordanian Monarch in Amman on 27 November 1973 "for consultations". And finally, President Sadat in his Summit meeting in Algiers listed Jordan among the countries concerned with the Middle East settlement. He also listed the Palestinians.

Egypt-Jordan Link

It was this duplicity in Arab approach that culminated in the Alexandria Declaration on 8 July 1974, following the talks between President Sadat and King Hussein. President Sadat wanted to keep the peace process moving. The disengagement of forces was achieved on the Syrian front (in May 1974) after a similar disengagement on the Egyptian front (in January 1974). Apparently the Americans had assured the Egyptian President

10 The King's explanation was reported by his Premier, Zeid Rifai who attended the meeting between the King and the diplomats. *Arab World Weekly*, 1 December 1973, p. 17.

and some other Arab leaders about the possibility of a similar disengagement on the Jordanian front, and that it would lead to further peace moves and ultimate reconvening of the Geneva peace conference. Encouraged by the American attitude, especially during President Nixon's visit to the Middle East in June 1974, President Sadat moved towards a definite approach *vis-a-vis* the Palestinian question, which he described as removing the Palestinian-Jordanian contradiction to face the opposite side at peace negotiations with a united Arab front. In the communique that was issued following the talks between Sadat and Hussein on 18 July 1974, the two sides declared that the PLO is the legitimate representative of the Palestinians, "with exception of the Palestinians residing in the Hashemite Jordanian Kingdom". They also "agreed that it was necessary to have a disengagement agreement on the Jordanian front as a first step towards a just peaceful solution"¹¹

Thus for the first time Egypt came out openly in support of Jordan on two major issues: that the PLO was not the sole representative of the Palestinians and that Jordan had the right to negotiate and arrange disengagement of forces with Israel, which in effect meant the reestablishment of the Jordanian authority on the West Bank.

Meanwhile the PLO, apprehensive of Arab manoeuvring, was coming to a stage where it could take a stand and outline its terms, if it was at all to participate in peace negotiations. With initial diplomatic success having achieved at Algiers Conference, and the radicals in the PLO having been cornered during subsequent tussle, the PLO leadership came out with a clear approach towards the whole question of Palestinian participation in the peace talks, and categorically refused to take part in any peace negotiations held within the framework of Resolution 242. The Palestine National Council (Parliament in exile), in its meeting held in Cairo in early June 1974, approved a ten-point programme of "phased political action". The first point of the programme said that Resolution 242 "suppresses the national right of our people, deals with the cause of our people as a problem of

11 Jordan and Egypt, joint communique on King Hussein's talks with President Sadat (Text) *Alexandria*, 18 July 1974, in *Egyptian Gazette*, 19 July 1974, p. 1.

refugees", and declared: "Therefore the organization refuses to deal with this resolution on this basis at any level whether Arab or international, including the Geneva Conference".¹² With this resolution the PLO launched a campaign to prevent Jordan from having a disengagement of forces with Israel on the West Bank. It also demanded priority to be given to the Palestinian problem in course of attempts at solution of the conflict by putting it as the first item on the agenda, as it was this problem which was the root cause of what was known as the Middle East Conflict.

The Egypt-Jordan disfavour of the PLO, which was being openly supported by the US,¹³ provided it with an opportunity to rally the Arab support in its favour, and create some sort of polarization on this particular issue in the Arab world aimed at isolation of the Egyptian-Jordanian attempt. Despite President Sadat's recognized role and relaxed Arab attitude towards his approach *vis-a-vis* the US diplomacy, the Alexandria communique was not appreciated in the Arab world. Opposition to this new approach by left-oriented regimes like Syria and Algeria was quite natural. But it was Saudi Arabia who apparently influences Egypt against ignoring the Palestinian issue so decisively and openly.

Role of Saudi Arabia

King Feisal was somewhat serious in his approach towards the Palestinian question and was also less submitting to the US peace policy for the Middle East after October 1973. Besides anxiety on the possibility of domination of the leftist elements over the PLO, particularly, by 'Fatah', its major component, he was also keen to prevent it from being influenced by the Soviet Union. Before Egypt-Jordan communiqué was issued, Arafat's visit to Moscow at the head of a strong PLO delegation had already been decided. But he was to travel to Moscow via Cairo. After the joint communique, Arafat broke this schedule and went straight to Moscow. There the PLO delegation was warmly welcomed and the Soviet Union announced its agreement to allow

12 *Falastin al-Thawrah*, 12 June 1974, p. 12.

13 Following Sadat-Hussein agreement in July in Alexandria King Hussein visited Washington, and a joint communiqué that was issued after his talks there on 18 August 1974, focussed on American support for a Jordanian-Israeli disengagement of forces.

the PLO to set up a representative office in Moscow. King Feisal was visiting Egypt during 30 July - 7 August 1974 mainly to discuss the dispute between the Palestinians and Jordan about the future of the West Bank, when the news of high level Palestinian-Soviet talks and the Soviet desire to give a new turn to its relations with the PLO came. Though King Feisal in his patronizing way praised Sadat for his agreement with King Hussein that led to the issuance of the joint communiqué in July, the new Moscow-PLO rapprochement seemed to have its impact, and Egypt was prevailed upon by Feisal's influence to introduce some changes in its stand as envisaged in Egypt-Jordan communiqué. Within less than three weeks of its issuance *Al-Ahram* reported a four-point explanation of the communiqué which the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Ismail Fahmi, gave during his meeting with Sa'id Kamal, Deputy Director of the Political Department of the PLO. On the question of disengagement of forces on the West Bank Fahmi was reported to have said: "Egypt is committed to prevent the return of the West Bank to the Jordanian authorities, civil or military, because this land belonged to the Palestinian people. It is up to their legitimate representatives to define their role at the time of disengagement on the Jordanian front."¹⁴

It is significant to take note of Arafat's visit to Saudi Arabia at the same time. Arafat was hurriedly invited to see King Feisal, and he left Damascus for Taif on 17 August 1974 to discuss with the King matters relating to Egypt-Jordan communiqué and reconciliation between Cairo and the PLO. Arafat expressed satisfaction over his talks with the King and appreciated Saudi "anxiety over the future of the Palestinian people and their cause."¹⁵

14 *Al-Ahram*, 5. August 1975, p. 1.

15 Yassir Arafat's statement to the Saudi Press Agency, Al-Bilad, 18 August 1974. According to *Al-Nahar* Arafat disclosed in a closed door meeting of the PLO Central Council (22-23 September 1974) that the disengagement of forces on the Jordanian front was prevented as a result of the Palestinian, Syrian and Algerian pressure on Saudi Arabia which ultimately opposed the measure successfully. The newspaper claimed that it obtained full text of the report of the Council proceedings which was distributed by Fatah leadership as a confidential circular among a limited number of important personalities of the guerilla movement. For text of the report see *Al-Nahar* 30 September 1974, p. 12.

The tripartite conference held on 20–21 September 1974, which included the Foreign Ministers of Egypt and Syria and head of the Political Department of the PLO, was yet another reversal to Jordan. The conference was aimed at co-ordination among the frontline Arab countries” in preparation for the proposed Geneva peace conference. Jordan was not invited to attend the conference due to the PLO opposition which refused to sit with Jordan despite the fact that the latter was to be included according to the original programme. Though the statement issued by the tripartite conference announced the agreement by the three parties for co-ordination with the other Arab states, which naturally included Jordan, it accepted the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and called for establishing Palestinian independent authority on the “Palestinian territory that will be freed diplomatically or militarily.”¹⁶

Besides the influence of King Feisal, there were other favourable factors as well. Algeria, along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, had emerged after the October 1973 War as a centre of gravity in the Arab world, whose attitude was counted most, both inside and outside the Arab world, so far as the Middle East conflict was concerned. The Algerian support to the PLO against the Alexandria communiqué was unequivocal and determined. Addressing a conference of the Palestinian students in Algeria, President Boumedienne strongly criticized King Hussein, and said that King Hussein had no role to play “in what is going now in the East.” He also said: “We consider this (recognition of the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people) a condition for any unified Arab action in future.”¹⁷ In an interview with *Al-Nahar* the Algerian President gave his country’s principal support to the PLO, and declared that for him the Palestinian cause was of prime importance in all that was internationally known as the Middle East crisis, because “the essence of the Arab-Israeli conflict is whether Palestine or no Palestine.”¹⁸

16 For text of the statement see *ibid.*, 22 September 1974.

17 Houari Boumedienne’s speech (excerpts), Algiers 22 August 1974, *Arab World Weekly*, 7 September 1974, p. 16.

18 *Al-Nahar*, 19 October 1974, p. 13.

Syrian Sympathy

There was yet another country, Syria, whose attachment with the Palestine question had far greater significance historically and geographically. Though Syria also had accepted Resolution 242 and therefore was naturally interested in forging some kind of arrangement between Jordan and the Palestinians so as to facilitate peace talks, for which Egypt was more actively working, its attitude was determined by two more delicate factors. One was that as result of Egypt's peace policy based on unilateral disengagement of forces with Israel, Syria was working on some kind of rapprochement with Jordan so as to resist political pressure from Egypt and some other Arab countries as well as military pressure from Israel, which later on resulted in arrangements between the two of closer co-ordination of far-reaching, long-termed significance. Another factor was that at the same time it wanted to maintain that considerable influence which it had on the Palestine resistance movement. In fact, Syria had recognized the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinians and was advocating the establishment of an independent Palestinian authority over the evacuated West Bank. Based on this approach it was in the process of forging a unified Syrian-Palestinian command, similar to the one it later worked out with Jordan. Therefore, most of time Syria played a role of an on-looker in the drama between Egypt and Jordan on the one hand and Egypt and PLO on the other. But as it had a feeling of closeness with the PLO both ideologically and in their perception of Israel, and also lately after the first disengagement on the Golan Heights, it was dissatisfied and severely critical of the new US proposals for a second disengagement of forces in Sinai, it offered a sort of passive support to the PLO against Jordan.

While surveying the events that changed the course in favour of the PLO one could not miss the vitality and maturity with which it diplomatically fought for its rights. Not only that the PLO would remain in demand of the Arab confrontation states as long as the conflict with Israel continued, but it also represented a cause of a people with profound appeal for the Arab public. With the strength and vitality that the PLO had acquired in course of time in the Arab world, it steered clear its way th-

rough the Arab Summit Conference in Rabat, where the Arab leaders had gathered to reach a final decision on the Palestinian question.

The Rabat Conference

At the Rabat Arab Summit Conference (26–30 October 1974) King Hussein again used his only pressure mechanism by arguing that Israel would not negotiate with the PLO and that any decision in favour of the PLO would blacken the prospects of peace. He faced opposition and was told that Israel should not be allowed to dictate terms to the Arabs. According to Arnaud de Borcgrave's account in *Newsweek*, who was included in the Jordanian delegation for the Summit Conference¹⁹ and who, therefore, was at the spot to witness the conference proceeding and also behind the scene manoeuvring: "when it came to show down over the Palestinian question, not one of the Arab leaders was willing to stand with King Hussein. Not only did Sadat's verbal promises of support to King Hussein fail to materialize, the Egyptian President barely opened his mouth. King Faisal also lay low, while hardliners like representatives from Syria, Algeria and Iraq made clear their support for the PLO."²⁰ With this King Hussein admitted his final defeat and submitted to the Arab consensus. In an interview with *Newsweek*, he made it clear, by saying: "There is an Arab verse which says, in effect, where my tribe goes, I go. As a part of the Arab nation, I go with the general consensus—regardless of any previous feelings."²¹

By all accounts the PLO success at Rabat was a major breakthrough for the Palestinian resistance movement and the most important achievement it ever had since its creation. It changed the very nature of the present Middle East conflict in the Arab view, as it shifted the focus from a conflict of borders to a conflict of the right of existence for a people as an independent nation. Never before had the Arabs recognized the Palestinians so

19 *Al-Hawadith*, 1 November 1974.

20 *Newsweek*, 11 November 1974, p. 35. For a first hand account of Rabat Summit Conference, also see *Al-Hawadith*, 1 November 1974, whose editor Selim al-Lauzi witnessed the Conference proceedings as a member of the Syrian delegation.

21 *Newsweek*, 11 November 1974, p. 26.

openly and unequivocally as an independent force as they did at Rabat. The resolution of the Rabat Summit Conference affirmed the "right of the Palestinian people to return to their homeland and to determine their destiny", and also their "right to establish an independent national authority under the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization in its capacity as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people on any Palestinian land that is liberated". It also committed the Arab states to "support this authority when established in all spheres and at all levels", and announced Arab support to the PLO "in the exercise of its responsibility at the pan-Arab and international levels and within the framework of Arab commitments."²²

Recognition in UN

The PLO success at Rabat was matched only by Arafat's address to the UN General Assembly on 13 November 1974. The General Assembly passed two resolutions on 22 November. Under the first resolution it reaffirmed "the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Palestine, including (a) right to self-determination; and (b) national independence and sovereignty", and also their right "to return to their homes and property from where they have been displaced."²³ Under the second resolution the PLO was granted an observer's status in the UN. Side by side with their efforts to draw the Arab world for a resolute approach towards the question of Palestine, the PLO was also trying to obtain its recognition at international level. The non-aligned and most of the Third World countries had already supported the Palestinians individually and at their forums, but their supports was further activated after the Arab oil might was felt throughout the globe as a result of the embargo and price hike in 1973. On other hand, the Soviet Union after its debacle in Egypt and uncertain future in Syria, was looking for some ally in the Arab group of the "confrontation line" for managing any possible settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict from inching away from its control. Though the PLO was not given much importance

22 For a full text of the resolution of Rabat Arab Summit Conference, see the *Arab World Weekly*, 2 November 1974, pp. 16-17.

23 A/Res. 3236 (XXIX), 22 November 1974, p. 4.

in the Soviet Union as a liberation movement, yet as a matter of fact, the Palestine question was the hardest nut to crack in all that was known as a Middle East conflict. It was the questions like Israeli evacuation from Jerusalem and the idea of creation of a Palestinian state that had been resisted by the Israelis the most. Also the Soviets would have presumed that the PLO as a movement of national liberation would be the last party in all the Arab "confrontation group" that would be influenced by the US with its bad record *vis-à-vis* such movements in the Third World. This seemed to be the important reason why Yassir Arafat was invited to visit Moscow (31 July–4 August 1974) and was given a warm welcome at the CPSU Central Committee and the Soviet Foreign Office. During his visit the Soviet Union formally recognized the PLO, allowed it to open its office in Moscow and announced that the Palestinians should be "equally represented at the proposed Geneva peace conference."²⁴ It is noteworthy that Soviet recognition came at a time when the Arabs were engaged in a controversy over the issue. The Soviet Union with its socialist bloc also supported the PLO's entry into the UN, and this support naturally would have influenced the attitude of quite a good number of countries in the Third World as well.

Constraints on PLO's Hopes

But this spectacular success of the PLO proved to be beyond its manageability, and out of proportion of its real size as a guerrilla movement. At first hand, its application required support of the Arab confrontation states which was not forthcoming, as they did not try for any change in the framework under which peace was proposed to be established. Israel, fully supported by the US, refused to recognize the PLO as such and the countries with sympathetic approach towards the PLO in Soviet bloc and the Third World were unable to play any meaningful role without Arab support. Therefore, after the Rabat and the UN resolutions, when time of actual practice came, the PLO began to lose the ground.

Even the Rabat resolution was not without lacuna. Under this resolution Jordan was included in the group of Arab states

24 *New Times* (Moscow), August 1974, p. 10.

directly concerned with the peace settlement and was called, along with Egypt, Syria and the PLO to meet and "draw up formula for organizing relations among them", which in effect was aimed at the question of negotiations with Israel. But no successful meeting of the four parties was held on the subject. Egypt still considered the US as the only power capable of enforcing peace in the area, while the latter thought that the PLO was unfit as a party for negotiations. This was the reason why the very first quadripartite meeting in Ciaro in January 1975 proved to be highly unsatisfactory to the PLO, which accused Egypt and Jordan of avoiding basic issues.

Thus, shortly after the Rabat conference, the momentum for the PLO support that was created in the Arab world a few months ago, began to diminish. The US, after frowning at the Arab decision at Rabat, reactivated its peace mission for unilateral disengagement of forces on the previous terms, and talks for second disengagement in Sinai began to evolve. The Algerian interest in a more radical oil politics for purely financial reasons grew, and its dispute with Morocco over the issue of the Western Sahara was heated up in the second half of 1975 and first half of 1976. This helped to remove the Algerian attention from the Middle East conflict. Such governments in the rejectionist group as Libya remained ineffective, and Iraq became busy giving a new face to its policies after settlement with Iran in March 1975.

Syria-PLO Link

In this gloomy situation Syria provided a respite to the PLO. Success of the US efforts for creating favourable conditions for unilateral talks between Egypt and the PLO, thus generating a sense of unity of purpose between the two. This had been the main cause of the Syrian support to the PLO from the beginning. Even before the Rabat Conference, Syria, apprehensive of Egypt's attitude, was seriously thinking, and also was trying to evolve a viable front to face any eventuality in case Egypt failed to some to its support during a possible war with Israel. Obviously it was Jordan, and not the PLO, which was really intended for the purpose of creating such a united front. But Syria did like to try the PLO as well. After all the PLO had emerged as a force, and units of the regular Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) were sta-

tioned in Syria, Zoheir Mohsin, leader of *Al-Saiqa*, a Syrian-sponsored Palestinian Organization, was head of the Military Department of the PLO. A unified political and military Syrian-Palestinian command was first to be proposed. It came in the Syrian President Hafez Assad's speech on 8 March 1975 on the occasion of the anniversary of 1963 military *coup*,²⁵ and was readily accepted by the PLO. Yassir Arafat issued a statement two hours after President Assad's speech, hailing "the courageous and nationalist stand taken by sisterly Syria", and warmly welcoming President Assad's invitation to set up such a joint command.²⁶ Later the Central Council of the PLO endorsed it on 21 March and asked the Executive Committee to contact the Syrian leadership for necessary discussion on the subject, describing "Palestine as extension of Syria, and Syria as extension of Palestine".²⁷

But the response from Jordan for establishing a similar command, despite its willingness for creating a special relationship with Syria, was conscious and required extensive behind the scene contacts and probings. Though the first mention of the decision of the two countries to set up a "supreme Syrian-Jordanian Command Council" came rather late on 22 August 1975 in a joint communiqué that was issued at the end of King Hussein's visit to Syria, it proved to be more stable and practically in line with the Syrian policy that was still taking shape. Since he came to power in 1970, President Assad, unlike the regime he overthrew, pursued a policy of closer co-operation with his Arab neighbours, most of them with right-oriented regimes, to face the Israeli challenge, and discounted guerrillas' ability to achieve any tangible result in their efforts to change the situation in Arab favour. In the beginning, he maintained political and military arrangements with Egypt and when this failed, he turned towards Jordan and to some extent towards Lebanon as well. The question how Palestinians were able to play a role in that framework was left for the PLO to decide. The Syrian attitude towards the Lebanese civil war was an indication to its policy towards the countries of the region having common borders with Israel and

25 For the excerpts from President Assad's speech as distributed by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), see *Arab World Weekly*, 15 March 1975, p. 14-15.

26 For Arafat's statement see *Falastin -al-Thawaran*, 16 March 1975, p. 39.

27 *Ibid.*, 23 March 1975, p. 8.

also towards the Palestinians. While maintaining good relations with the Lebanese Government, Syria was also assisting the anti-*status quo* leftists, obviously in a hope to pressure the rightist Lebanese establishment for a more favourable policy towards Syria and effective leftist participation in the government. When this did not materialize due to the leftist insistence for full control, Syria intervened in Lebanon militarily in favour of the rightist establishment, and took no mercy on the Palestinians despite its proposed military alliance with them. In the face of a decisive leftist onslaught in the beginning of 1976, Syria grew apprehensive of a future Lebanon, effectively under leftist control, with more radical posture towards a possible Middle East settlement and the question of establishing a Palestinian state, and more attending to the Soviet Union than the requirements of the states of the region having direct conflict with Israel.

PLO's Wrong Strategy in Lebanon

In fact, the PLO's alignment with the leftists in Lebanon was the biggest mistake the organization had committed after its confrontation with the Jordanian Government in 1970, which led to its extermination in Jordan. So far its success was due to its open commitment to neutralism in Arab affairs and non-involvement with the politics of Arab states. When it aligned itself with the Lebanese leftists and took active role in the civil war on its behalf it was alienated in the group of the Arab rightists, who with their growing strength, abhorred Lebanon turning left, and also grew apprehensive of a possible sovereign Palestinian state that, however moderate it might pretend to be, there was a danger of its turning radical, and thus not only injecting radicalism in some of the Arab politics, but also creating a permanent source of embarrassment to the Arab states who wanted peace and prosperity. In the beginning, this Arab support to the Lebanese rightists was cautious and limited, but after the decisive gains of the leftists a general anxiety was felt in the Arab rightist circles over the possibility of change in status quo in Lebanon. Therefore, when Syria intervened militarily in March 1976 an overall satisfaction was felt. This was of course with "the exception of Libya and Iraq who voiced dissention. Egypt also criticized even though it was concerned for the safeguard of the rightists in

Lebanon. However, its criticism was directed solely against the Syrian gains as a result of intervention. The important part of all this game was that the Palestinians were caught at a right moment. So far they had been embarrassing the Arab confrontation states by their successful manoeuvring to make these states give more meaning to their otherwise undefined commitments to the Palestinian cause. As these states proceeded in their peace policies they found the Palestinians the biggest stumbling block against an overall peace move for which a stage was being set after the second disengagement in Sinai in September 1975. On the other hand, Jordan reactivated its role shortly after the Rabat Summit Conference through Syria, when Egypt's efforts to bring it in as a party concerned with the conflict failed during the quadripartite conference held in Cairo in January 1975. Despite Egypt's initial objections to the Syrian role in Lebanon, in reality it suited her the most if Syria took the responsibility of taming the Palestinians and bringing them to terms with the Arab confrontation states.

As a matter of fact, the Syrian success in Lebanon provided her with a strong bargaining point *vis-à-vis* Egypt when a mini-Arab Summit meeting was held by Saudi Arabia in Riyadh in October 1976 to iron the differences between Syria and Egypt. There were two basic points of friction between them. One was Egypt's policy of collaboration with the US approach based on separate arrangements between each of the front-line Arab states and Israel; and the second was the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, which acquired for her a commanding position both in the affairs of Lebanon and the PLO. This summit meeting resulted in Syria dropping its objection to Egypt's unilateral agreement with Israel in Sinai, and Egypt accepting the Syrian position in Lebanon. It became the beginning of a meaningful unified policy of the Arab front-line states both towards the Palestinian issue and towards the question of reconvening the Geneva peace conference, which in turn also meant an ultimate subordination of the PLO to Jordan in peace efforts.

As a result of this agreement the old idea of Jordanian participation in peace efforts as "a party directly concerned with the conflict" was revived, and a virtual triangular alliance of the three front-line Arab states, namely, Egypt, Syria and Jordan

was formed. To bring the PLO to move in this circle, contacts were re-established, and Egypt again proposed the creation of a "link" between Jordan and the PLO.²⁸ Now the PLO was required to re-define its stand both towards Jordan and Israel, and to qualify itself for the participation in peace talks. Trapped in this circle the PLO not only accepted the Syrian hegemony in the Arab part of the historic region of Syria (Bilad-ash-Sham), but also started negotiations with Jordan to form the "link" in accordance with the Syro-Egyptian wishes.

The Arab Dilemma Continues

Therefore the Arab dilemma *vis-à-vis* the Palestine question remained unresolved, despite some pro-Arab gestures in the US Middle East policy, and its recent announcement of recognition of the "legitimate rights of the Palesitinian people."²⁹ There might also be an effort to bring the Palestinians in the proposed Geneva talks in some form or the other, but it is unlikely that the PLO would be accepted to represent at any such talks as an independent body. To this, as we have already discussed, both Egypt and Syria have obviously agreed. They have repeatedly made it plain that the PLO participation is not necessary at all on PLO's terms. President Assad is on record as having said: "The refusal of the PLO to participate (in the Geneva peace talks) will not cause any paralysis in the movement of the Arab

28 Contacts were renewed and announcements made to this effect after Sadat-Assad meeting in October 1976. For example King Hussein visited Egypt in the middle of January 1977 during which the Egyptian Foreign Minister explained his country's position *vis-à-vis* the issue by saying that "Egypt encourages the existence of a relationship between Jordan and the proposed state of Palestine." President Sadat, speaking at a joint press conference on 17 February 1977 with the US Secretary of State during the latter's visit to Cairo, called for an "official and declared link" between the PLO and Jordan. President Assad later on 21 February also came out with his open and active support to the idea.

29 The words under quotation were contained in a joint US-Soviet communique on the Middle East, released on 1 October 1977 (see the text of the communique in *Kuwait Times*, 2 October), which also concurrently testified the two Super-Powers agreement on the question of reconvening the Geneva Peace Conference.

states concerned, and will not change the aims of the Arab struggle to achieve Israeli withdrawal".³⁰

This is a dilemma which involves the Palestinians also, along with the Arab states. This stems, on the one hand from the readiness of the Arab states, after October 1973 War, to settle all the major issues that have been the cause of conflict with Israel, including the Palestine issue without taking into account meaningfully the Palestinian view of the subject and on the other from the Palestinian preparedness to follow in the foot-steps of the Arab states. No peace at this stage is expected to satisfy the minimum Palestinian requirements, and, therefore, it would be of interest to see its impact, if it ever comes, not on the Palestinians alone, but also on the Arab public opinion in general.

30 This came in an interview President Assad gave to the *Time* magazine on 14 January 1977. The text of the interview was released by the *Damascus Home Service* as monitored in *SWB* (ME/5415) 18 January 1977, P.A./7. The terms "rights of the Palestinian People" and "Palestinian homeland" have become so elastic that every Arab country is using it to suit its own policy without taking into consideration how the Palestinians define them.