



The Palestinian Left and Its Decline

Loyal Opposition

Francesco Saverio Leopardi

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To Benedetta.

PREFACE

This book deals with the history of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) during its declining phase, namely between the 1982 PLO eviction from Lebanon and the crystallisation of the Hamas-Fatah split in 2007. Being historically the main Marxist force within the Palestinian national movement, the PFLP's marginalisation process affected the condition of the whole Palestinian Left. The entire leftist camp, notwithstanding its chronic fragmentation, described itself as alternative to Fatah domination, and later also to Hamas' rise, thus the specificities and factors behind the PFLP's decline did not leave the other organisations untouched.

The supposedly alternative that the Palestinian Left embodied had nonetheless to face significant contradictions that would emerge in full strength after the shocking changes which 1982 brought to the PLO paradigms of action. Claiming to represent an alternative, a counterhegemonic political project that rivalled Fatah's strategy for liberation came to be increasingly at odds with the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's unquestioned loyalty to the Fatah-dominated PLO. Such "loyal opposition" ultimately entailed the relinquishment of all counterhegemonic role, undermining the *raison d'être* of a revolutionary Left that, notably in the PFLP's case, still nominally adhered to the creation of a socialist, democratic state all over the land of historic Palestine. This book examines the PFLP's political agency to unveil how such relinquishment happened and to illustrate what dynamics and behaviours it produced. This meant constructing the PFLP's process of decline as the result of inefficient policy

making rather than the mechanic result of fateful, external events such as the collapse of “Existing Socialism”. A focused analysis of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left’s marginalisation is long overdue, and this book aims at starting to make up such shortcoming of Palestinian political historiography. This kind of perspectives on Palestinian politics are all the more urgent as the Palestinian national movement continues to experience an unresolvable crisis that has deprived its main actors of much of their political legitimacy. The absence of a credible Palestinian Left is thus part and parcel of the current political paralysis in a time of unprecedented attacks to Palestinian self-determination on both a local and a global scale.

Historians and political scientists working on the contemporary Palestinian national movement might find this book beneficial, but I hope that the ideas and concepts that it developed will be interesting to academics and students focusing on the whole Middle East and North Africa and beyond. This volume contributes to the wider discussion on how leftist national liberation movements handled their relations with nationalism and, more specifically, on how they acted within a political arena dominated by nationalist forces and discourses. Moreover, in light of its chronology, this book also addresses the issue of leftist radical renewal in a post-Soviet world. That is why, after a detailed analysis of the PFLP’s trajectory, a separate chapter features a parallel analysis of two leftist movements that faced similar challenges: the Egyptian communist movement and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.

I took the first steps in the research behind this volume almost a decade ago, during my final year as a master’s student at the Department of Asian and North African Studies in the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. During those times, I was fortunate enough to find in Massimiliano Trentin a supportive supervisor who wisely guided me in the first elaborations of my ideas. Ever since, Massimiliano became a colleague and a friend with whom collaboration continues fruitfully and if this book has seen the light it is also thanks to his constant professional and personal support. The time spent in Palestine has been crucial in the ideation of this book for obvious reasons. My stays in Ramallah and Bir Zeit would have not been so enriching without the presence and friendship of Nicola and Farah. They opened to me not only the doors of their Ramallah home, but also those of the local academic community. I am thankful to their Palestinian family for helping me to reach out to veterans of Palestinian politics whose insights have been extremely important to my research. I also thank particularly Nicola for sharing his experience with me throughout the last eight years.

My doctoral studies at the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in the University of Edinburgh were a central step in the development of the ideas and analyses that became the core of this book. My gratitude goes to Anthony Gorman, my PhD first supervisor, for the time spent discussing the subject of my research and for his precious advices. I am also thankful to Thomas Pierret whose stimulating comments helped me to improve my look on the history of the Palestinian Left. In Edinburgh I met many people who deserve acknowledgement for their support, but I would like to mention in particular two of them: Sarah, for her uncommon encouragement and for her constant help, and Abla, who assisted me several times in the process of collecting important information.

Beirut, and specifically the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies, has been the main location of my archival research. The librarians' helpfulness allowed me to retrieve the material I needed in a friendly and professional environment. I am also grateful to the Council for British Research in the Levant for providing a travel grant which was essential in ensuring the success of my fieldwork in the Lebanese capital. Lebanon is the place of some of my dearest memories and for this I am grateful to Oriol and Ilaria: they allowed me in their home and treated me like family. I would like to thank all those people who accepted to talk to me about their political experience within the Palestinian national movement. I cannot name them here, but they had a fundamental role in the creation of this book. It is my sympathy towards the Palestinians' rightful quest for liberation and self-determination that led me to become interested in the history of their national movement. I hope that the honest efforts behind this book honour the lives and struggle of all those who fought and still fight for justice in Palestine and Israel.

I am thankful to my parents for their unquestioned trust in my ideas and aspirations, their support has always been a priceless certainty. This book is dedicated to Benedetta, to whom goes my most profound gratitude for her strengthening presence, for filling my life with meaning and for inspiring me to be a better man.

Verona, Italy
26 February 2020

Francesco Saverio Leopardi

Note on Transliteration

Arabic words are transliterated following the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Diacritics have not been employed with the exception of ʾ for *hamza* (vocal suspension) and ʿ for ʿayn (guttural consonant). Arabic and foreign names have been transliterated according to their most common version in British English.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AMB	Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades
ANM	Arab Nationalists Movement
APF	Alliance of Palestinian Forces
BDS	Boycott Divestment and Sanctions
CPE	Communist Party of Egypt
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DA	Democratic Alliance
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
DG	Democratic Gathering
DoP	Declaration of Principles
ECP	Egyptian Communist Party
EMNL	Egyptian Movement for National Liberation
FPR	Forces of Popular Resistance
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions
GUPW	General Union of Palestinian Women
Hadetu	al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya li-l-Taharrur al-Watani (Democratic Movement for National Liberation)
Hamas	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement)
JCP	Jordanian Communist Party
JRA	Japanese Red Army
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
LF	Lebanese Forces
LNDF	Lebanese National Democratic Front
LNM	Lebanese National Movement
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
NA	National Alliance

NFLP	National Front for the Liberation of Palestine
NGC	National Guidance Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIHC	National and Islamic Higher Committee for the Follow-Up of the Intifada
NSF	National Salvation Front
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PCC	Palestine Central Council
PCP	Palestine Communist Party
PF-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLF	Palestinian Liberation Front
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
PNC	Palestine National Council
PNF	Palestinian National Front
PNGO	Palestinian NGOs Network
PNI	Palestinian National Initiative
PNO	Popular Nasserist Organisation
PNSF	Palestine National Salvation Front
PPP	Palestine People's Party
PPSF	Palestinian Popular Struggle Front
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SCP	Syrian Communist Party
SLA	South Lebanese Army
UAR	United Arab Republic
UECP	Unified Egyptian Communist Party
UN	United Nations
UNLU	Unified National Leadership of the Uprising
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPWC	Union of Palestinian Women's Committees
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WPCP	Workers and Peasants' Communist Party
WYM	Workers' Youth Movement



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

CRISIS OF THE LEFT, CRISIS OF THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

More than seventy years after the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba* and the creation of the State of Israel, as of January 2020 history seems to have rolled back on the question of Palestine. Commenting on US President Trump's announcement of his long-awaited "Vision for Peace", Rashid Khalidi noted that since the 1917 Balfour Declaration:

the great powers have repeatedly tried to act in spite of the Palestinians, ignoring them, talking for them, or over their heads, or pretending that they did not exist.¹

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stood next to President Trump during the ceremony organised to unveil the US sponsored plan, while no Palestinian representative was invited, consistently with the total US and Israeli neglect of Palestinian voices during preparatory works. As Khalidi and many others observed, this approach reflected the US and Israeli colonial perspectives informing their vision for settling the question of Palestine, one where indigenous views should not be considered. But the absence of Palestinian leaders as well as their feeble response to the publication of the plan also signalled the deep political and representation crisis that the Palestinian national movement has been experiencing since the 2007 Hamas-Fatah division.

Over the last five years, events in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) underscored the growing distance between the once dominant Palestinian *fasa'il* (factions) and popular mobilisation against the occupation. Throughout most of 2018 and early 2019, thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip joined weekly demonstrations and sit-ins in what became known as the “Great Return Marches” to protest the ongoing Israeli blockade of the Hamas-ruled enclave. Palestinian factions had no direct role in launching the mobilisation which was instead the initiative of civil society organisations. In fact, the creation of an institutionalised coordination committee by the political factions contributed to winding down the marches’ momentum.²

In this context, Hamas’ government in Gaza and the Fatah-controlled Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the West Bank, blocked in their competition for primacy, have proven unable to mobilise Palestinian society effectively on a national level, let alone within the Palestinian diaspora communities. Neither the PNA, as legacy and heir of the national project embodied by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), nor Hamas as its Islamist alternative succeeded in fulfilling the Palestinian long-term goals of self-determination and statehood. Within this impasse, these political entities stopped providing the Palestinian people with a comprehensive and inclusive institutional, political and cultural framework in which to voice, struggle for and pursue their political and social aspirations.

Against the backdrop of this crisis and of Palestinian political polarisation, the absence of an alternative “third way” between the internationally recognised PNA camp and the “radical” Islamist option arises as a central question. The political diversity of the Palestinian national movement points to the study of the Palestinian Left as a first step to investigate and understand the reasons of such absence. The Palestinian Left’s legacy of struggle for social and national emancipation, its pioneering mobilisation of labour, women and students as well as its historical contribution in terms of ideological elaboration should provide solid bases upon which establishing an alternative to the current deadlock. Nonetheless, the Palestinian Left appears marginalised and its factions display little influence on the general orientations of the national movement. Looking at the reasons behind the current condition of the Palestinian Left thus means pursuing a clearer understanding of the crisis affecting Palestinian politics nowadays.

The decline of the Palestinian Left cannot be approached without addressing specifically the marginalisation that its main faction, the Popular

Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), experienced throughout more than two decades since the early 1980s. The PFLP was not only the main leftist faction in terms of membership, popular support and international recognition. Within the Palestinian national movement, and specifically the PLO, it also represented the first competitor for Fatah. Its strong emphasis on armed struggle, its strict organisational rules and its Marxist-Leninist, but also Maoist, ideological background earned the PFLP the fame of hard-line, revolutionary force within the national movement. Its image of revolutionary “purity” has been often put in contrast with Fatah’s pragmatism, which the PFLP itself frequently denounced as opportunism. Therefore, the PFLP’s increasing irrelevance left a representative void within the Palestinian national movement which appears more significant as the Islamist and nationalist-secular options are at a standstill.

The current condition of the PFLP and of the Palestinian Left cannot only be ascribed to single external factors and events that chipped away its political weight. In fact, it is also the result of the conduct of a “loyal opposition” that stopped embodying a counterhegemonic project while the mainstream leadership asserted its vision increasingly uncontested. This left room to the emergence of a new Islamist competitor which in turn, after achieving partial hegemony, exhausted its alternative political capital. The PFLP’s conduct must therefore be analysed in historical perspective to comprehend the sources of its political action that ultimately led it to de facto relinquish its counterhegemonic role. Providing a historical account of the PFLP’s decline therefore means addressing a major cause behind the Palestinian crisis of legitimacy and political representation. The lack of political and organisational renewal within the Palestinian national movement is tightly linked to the shortcomings of the PFLP and of the whole Palestinian Left.

The account of the PFLP’s conduct behind its decline entails a focus on its collective agency conceived as the complex of discourses, priority formulation, positions and decisions that the PFLP adopted to tackle its political crisis. This approach allows to identify a pattern in the PFLP’s political agency that challenges static views of the PFLP’s marginalisation singling out specific factors and events without defining a relational network. The historical perspective on political agency sheds light on the core factors forging the PFLP’s policies, which cannot be neglected in achieving a comprehensive understanding of its decline and of its persistent marginalisation.

The focused study of the PFLP's marginalisation process also opens new perspectives on the historical role of the PLO and its successor the PNA. By investigating their functioning from the PFLP's minority and oppositional perspective, the PLO and the PNA not only emerge as institutional frameworks that embodied a political setting and target for the PFLP's policies. The exploration of the PFLP's marginalisation process allows to evaluate the PLO and the PNA in their double, and to a certain extent paradoxical, function of a constraining yet simultaneously vital framework for the PFLP's agency. This perspective on the PLO and the PNA entails a reassessment of intra-factional relations within umbrella organisations and quasi-state entities. The PFLP's case can thus be considered along the experience of other leftist organisations participating in national liberation movements.

The problem of a leftist organisation acting within the boundaries of an overarching nationalist discourse and platform resonated throughout the post-colonial history of the Middle East and North Africa. The ability to define an autonomous national liberation platform has been key to the success or failure of leftist experiences, that is why, the PFLP and Palestinian leftist trajectories should be read alongside the paths of similar forces acting in different national contexts. Addressing the PFLP's marginalisation by focusing on its conduct means also problematising the issue of leftist decline in the post-Soviet world. The stress on political agency as response to emerging challenges underscores the importance of "individual" aspects characterising single cases. Leftist decline was not a mere by-product of the end of existing socialism but the result of peculiar reaction to such crisis, hence the validity of an analytical approach centred on political agency.

SUBJECTIVE FACTORS, DILEMMAS AND POLICY FLUCTUATIONS

The history of the PFLP outlined in this book stretches over 25 years, between two of the most fateful events in the history of the Palestinian national movement: the eviction of the PLO from its headquarters in Beirut following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 2007 geographical and political split between Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah-dominated PNA in the West Bank.

In summer 1982, the PLO saw its state-in-exile destroyed and its military capabilities severely reduced at the hands of the Israeli army. In reconsidering its strategy, the PLO leadership relied on its wider international networks and gave priority to diplomatic activity to salvage its achievements and fulfil Palestinian long-term goals. For the PFLP, the loss of Beirut questioned its ability to perform the revolutionary task upon which it was founded and that had been substantially able to fulfil until then. The protection of the “Palestinian revolution” and the participation in the “progressive front” during the Lebanese Civil War provided the framework for such revolutionary performance, while the PFLP contributed to the PLO state-building project. After the relocation in Damascus, the PFLP’s autonomy was reduced, while renewed global interest in a political settlement seemed to favour Fatah’s new orientations. The counterhegemonic role played within the PLO was thrown into crisis and consequently, the PFLP started to lose constraining power towards Arafat’s growing individualism. During the following decades, the PFLP did not regenerate its revolutionary action notwithstanding the evolving political scenarios emerged ever since 1982. The PFLP’s conduct during the 2006–07 Hamas–Fatah conflict represented the conclusive step in its declining trajectory. Afterwards, the PFLP remained on the margins of Palestinian politics, while the whole national movement continued to face the impasse stemming from political polarisation and dysfunctional institutions. Such persistent marginalisation signals the perpetuation of problematic aspects in the PFLP’s agency which must be the subject of historical analysis.

In addressing, the PFLP’s marginalisation within Palestinian politics, the Marxian categories of subjective and objective factors are employed to analyse the PFLP’s trajectory.³ In this case, objective factors consist of external developments and events outside the PFLP’s control which are often highlighted as the main causes for its decline. Conversely, subjective factors can be identified with the PFLP’s own agency in facing such developments. By prioritising subjective factors, the goal is not to assert their overall predominance over outstanding objective factors. Rather the intention is to problematise the issue of the PFLP’s decline by showing the interconnection of objective and subjective factors instead of pointing to an apparent causal relation.

Such focus on the PFLP’s agency allows to identify the roots of its problematic response to the challenges emerged during the period under scrutiny. As part of a national liberation movement, the PFLP had always had to balance political competition with the pursuit of strategic goals.

The contestation of Fatah leadership of the PLO thus occurred within the boundaries of a shared platform defined on the bases of nationalist goals and values. Fundamentally, the PFLP's bid for alternative leadership never questioned either its adherence to the common Palestinian platform or the legitimacy of its institutions. The Marxist faction thus pursued an opposition to Fatah which was nonetheless loyal to the principles and rules stemming from integration within the PLO. This produced an "opposition-integration dilemma" that, following the 1982 paradigmatic shifts in Palestinian politics, started to hinder the PFLP's agency. Loyal adherence to the PLO was not only due to the respect of shared values, but also stemmed from practical benefits such as access to funding or international recognition. The loss of the Lebanese sanctuary further exacerbated the PFLP's dependence on institutional integration while the bases of its opposition to Fatah appeared increasingly precarious. The PFLP would continue to seek integration in the hegemonic Palestinian bloc even as the PLO significance declined following the creation of the PNA in 1993–94. This exacerbated the opposition-integration dilemma in light of the stated rejection of the process that established the Palestinian self-governing entity.

The growing difficulty in resolving the opposition-integration dilemma led the PFLP's action to "fluctuate" between contrasting priorities. Between 1982 and 2007, recurring "policy fluctuations" affected the PFLP's political agency undermining the coherence of its action and preventing the achievement of the goals spelled in its agenda. Popularity and credibility were also affected from such negative pattern which can hence be considered as a major cause for the PFLP's gradual, yet irreversible political marginalisation. Inasmuch as it represents a negative pattern, the concept of policy fluctuation adopted herein should not be confused with political flexibility or pragmatism. Pragmatism would imply change in fundamental positions and political agency according to the evolution of the circumstantial conditions. Changes should have a deep scope and be part of a coherent overall political vision. In fact, pragmatism was an essential aspect of the PFLP's political experience being a quality fundamental for non-state actors lacking the assets of statehood.

Conversely, policy fluctuation entails the pursuit of an inconsistent political line in the attempt to address clashing priorities or pressures. The political actor is faced with single or multiple dilemmas and fails to resolve them adequately. From this stems an inconsistent agency that undermines political effectiveness and credibility among the supporting base and contributes to political marginalisation. In fact, fluctuant and pragmatic

responses coexisted in the PFLP's agency during the period addressed, however, policy fluctuations ultimately prevailed over pragmatism.

The opposition-integration dilemma not only exacerbated the policy fluctuation pattern directly, but it also emphasised other contradictions affecting the PFLP and contributing to the inconsistency of its agency. In a context of power centralisation in the hands of one charismatic, internationally recognised leader, namely PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, and of a parallel loss of political weight, the PFLP had to question its adherence to some of its tenets in order to protect its political leverage. The role of armed struggle, the PFLP's idea of Palestinian state and the historical rejection of diplomatic solutions for the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as relations with supposedly hostile and friendly Arab regimes, came into question. Tensions were produced between these underpinning positions and the need for flexibility to ensure integration and consensus within the PLO and, in turn, influence on its policies. Although these tensions had already emerged in previous circumstances, such as with the 1974 PLO adoption of the "Ten-Point Program"⁴ for instance, the specific aspects of the post-Beirut phase emphasised their impact on the PFLP itself.

On the Palestinian level, the need to effectively counterbalance Fatah posed the question of relations and alliances with other PLO opposition factions, leftist in particular. Factional priorities thus had to be concealed with different agendas and views on paramount issues such as peace plans, the role of armed struggle, relations with the Arab regimes and degree of opposition to Fatah. The PFLP's hard-line fostered tensions with other leftist forces, undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of "democratic" alliances supposed to face Fatah's "deviation" from national values and goals. Differently, when the PFLP attempted association with Palestinian Islamists following the 1993 Oslo accords, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad's unrecognition of the PLO status compromised mutual relations. In fact, Islamist rejection of traditional Palestinian consensus on the PLO had a greater weight than ideological divergences in preventing an effective collaboration.

The opposition-integration dilemma also impacted the PFLP's regional relations, particularly during the 1980s and specifically in the case of Syria. Damascus and the PFLP apparently espoused the same "steadfast" line in resisting political settlements of the conflict, but the Syrian regime's will to assert control over the PLO clashed with the PFLP's respect of Palestinian autonomy.

Policy fluctuations stemming from the opposition-integration dilemma also affected the PFLP in its internal dynamics, fuelling existing tensions within the organisation. As the centre of the Palestinian national movement relocated to the OPT with the outbreak of the First Intifada (1987–1993), all PLO factions with a significant presence there were faced with the emergence of local leaderships. The different conditions that the national movement in the OPT and the exiled PLO experienced in the previous two decades had significant political and organisational repercussions. The “inside” national movement developed a less hierarchical leadership, resorted historically to non-violent mobilisation rather than armed struggle and prioritised the end of the occupation over total liberation. State-building in the “outside” accentuated a vertical structuring of political mobilisation as PLO institutions were gradually bureaucratised to perform state-like tasks. These and other factors, such as the prominence enjoyed by the national movement in the OPT following the uprising, fostered the emergence of an “inside-outside” divide which did not exempt the PFLP.⁵ Although the OPT branches recognised the leadership of the exiled cadres, their rise to prominence represented a potential challenge to power balances both on the factional and the PLO levels.

Since 1987, the PFLP’s own inside-outside divide consistently interacted with the underlying opposition-integration dilemma on several aspects, further complicating policymaking. For instance, during the First Intifada the exiled leadership, eager to maintain its grip on the organisation while ensuring participation in the PLO institutions, would clash with its inside branch willing to pursue a tougher line towards Fatah’s diplomatic strategy. Conversely, in the post-Oslo phase, differences emerged on the position towards the PNA institutions, as the inside displayed its readiness to engage the new polity, free of the outside’s ideological and historical bond to the PLO status. As a result, the PFLP’s policy fluctuations were emphasised while its strength as an opposition force and its overall stance within a changing political environment resulted undermined, favouring the declining trend.

Ultimately, the opposition-integration dilemma was the manifestation of a conundrum common to many leftist organisations participating in national liberation movements. Such dilemma originated from the fundamental problem of formulating an effective radical and counterhegemonic case for national liberation, capable of mobilising consensus, confronting competing forces and facing paradigmatic changes. In the PFLP’s case, the opposition-integration dilemma also echoed the post-colonial dilemma

that Frantz Fanon had identified in the relations between the “national bourgeoisie” and the “revolutionary masses”, or the need to transform national consciousness into social and political consciousness.⁶ The PLO quasi-state provided the conditions for the appearance of this dilemma of which the contrasting priorities of opposition and integration are an expression. Keeping these considerations in mind, the PFLP’s trajectory and dilemmas can be juxtaposed to those of other leftist forces committed to national liberation that have either achieved this goal or are still fighting for its realisation. That is why this book also discusses the ideas and dynamics illustrated departing from the PFLP’s case, considering differences and similarities in the paths of the Egyptian communist movement and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

STATE OF THE LITERATURE

Of all the academic efforts made to compile, analyse and understand the history of the contemporary Palestinian national movement, only a little part focused specifically on the PFLP or the Palestinian Left. The Palestinian mainstream, namely Fatah leadership of both the PLO and the PNA, as well as Palestinian political Islam have received a much wider attention. Ironically, this is to a certain extent yet another manifestation of the PFLP’s opposition-integration dilemma, as its unquestioned adherence to the PLO led observers to overlook its leftist trend.

In a 1987 article on the PFLP’s decision-making process, As’ad AbuKhalil talked of fluctuations and shifts in policy orientations as a result of both internal dynamics and external pressures.⁷ The concept of policy fluctuation drawn from AbuKhalil analysis allowed to backtrack from this “symptom” and identify its roots in the fundamental crisis of the PFLP’s revolutionary option after 1982. Starting from this point, the set of contradictions generating policy fluctuations is expanded as both long-standing and new factors interplayed in influencing the PFLP’s agency.

Thanks to its focus on the subjective factors, this book engages and challenges the literature addressing the PFLP and the Palestinian Left’s decline, providing both a critical account of this process and a new perspective on its chronology. Single reasons behind leftist marginalisation, such as the collapse of existing socialism and the rise of political Islam or the lack of ideological renewal and the negligence towards social issues, are not simply singled out.⁸ In fact, they are described as the indication of a deeper dynamic impacting negatively the PFLP and that dated earlier to

the emergence of specific problematic aspects. From this stem a new chronology of the crisis of the Palestinian Left which sees the early 1990s shocking developments as landmarks rather than starting points of a marginalisation process that was already in place. Likewise, the returning argument according to which doctrinal rigidity alienated the PFLP from popular support and made the organisation unfit to face historical shifts is also contested.⁹ On the contrary, the PFLP more often resorted to Marxist-Leninist, Maoist ideological and organisational principles to handle both pragmatic changes and policy fluctuations. It was rather the “conservative” use of Marxist analytical criteria and organisational rules that prevented the PFLP from continuing to embody the radical option within the national movement, enabling other actors to attract consensus around their alternative.

The development of a focused analytical approach on the PFLP’s agency and of its related concepts paves the way to fresh looks at intra-Palestinian relations. Thus, for instance, the dynamics of the PFLP’s opposition to the PLO mainstream, which are tangentially addressed in seminal works on the history of the Palestinian national movement, are thoroughly treated. The identification of the opposition-integration dilemma provides new perspectives on the PLO and its significance for opposition forces. While the existing literature often highlights the constraints that the PLO platform posed to Arafat’s agenda, adherence to the PLO erected major obstacles also for the PFLP. In the context of post-Oslo politics, the theme of opposition and integration in Palestinian institutions provides a theoretical framework to assess the PFLP’s ambiguous relations with the PNA. Such framework works as analytical link for two different historical phases, equipping the assessment of the PFLP’s decline with a fundamental historical scope.¹⁰ Furthermore, it represents an underlying perspective to discuss specific problematic aspects of the PFLP’s agency such as its orientations towards civil society and NGOs.¹¹

Covering the trajectory of the PFLP in its declining phase also enables a reassessment of Islamist-Leftist relations within the Palestinian national movement. The significant literature on Hamas and the Islamic Jihad touched limitedly on their relations with the PFLP and the Palestinian Left, stressing on ideological distance as representing the main divide between the two trends.¹² However, understanding the fundamental sources of the PFLP’s agency allows to analyse the feud beyond ideology and identify in its adherence to the PLO framework the main obstacle to collaboration with the Islamist forces. From this perspective, Hamas’

challenge to the PLO primacy and its assertion as new radical opposition can be appraised in its significance to the PFLP's marginalisation process.

Relying on its case study of the PFLP, and on its echoes with other leftist forces in the region, this book ultimately contributes to the renewed interest in the political and intellectual history of the Arab Left. Recent works based on multidisciplinary approaches and a variety of sources engaged with the reassessment of leftist trajectories in the Arab world. In spite of different geographies and chronologies, such new perspectives seek to illustrate the roots of and the dynamics that brought the Arab Left to crisis and irreversible marginalisation.¹³ Far from being an exclusively Palestinian problem, the lack of a revolutionary option confronting the increasingly delegitimised nationalist and Islamist camps emerges as a critical feature uniting the Middle East and North Africa. In such transformative times for the region, reassessing the history of Arab revolutionary forces thus appears more urgent than ever.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Since their foundations, all PLO factions have been producing and circulating a wide range of publications to assert and promote their views among militants and the Palestinian public. In particular, each organisation relied on at least one official mouthpiece, often in the form of weekly or monthly magazines. As a result, the statements, columns, interviews and opinion pieces published in these magazines provide the best sources to track the evolution of Palestinian politics and debates across history.

The main source of official publications for this book was the magazine *Al-Hadaf*, founded in 1969 by prominent Palestinian author and PFLP member Ghassan Kanafani as the official party mouthpiece. Started as a weekly publication, *Al-Hadaf* became a monthly magazine in 1995 and today is occasionally circulated in its electronic version while a PFLP-linked online platform exists under this name. Besides statements issued by the PFLP's governing bodies, such as the Politburo, Central Committee and Congress, *Al-Hadaf* reported declarations and interviews by the PFLP leaders and its editorial board has been consistently composed of top cadres holding posts within the PFLP and the PLO institutions. This kind of contents, as well as the presence of interviews and articles by other leading figures of the Palestinian national movement, provide detailed insights into the evolution of the PFLP's line and the development of relations with both national, regional and international forces.

The selection of *Al-Hadaf's* numbers issued between 1982 and 2013 employed for this study has been retrieved at the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut. Further PFLP documents, such as booklets, pamphlets or compiled volumes of official publications, have been obtained from various physical and virtual repositories, such as the library of the Beirut *Institut Français du Proche Orient* or PFLP-affiliated webpages.¹⁴

Besides the PFLP's official literature, this study also relied on documents issued by the political platforms in which the PFLP participated, first and foremost the PLO, as well as those of other Palestinian factions. This set of material was retrieved mainly from the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and specifically from its dedicated section on primary sources, *Documents and Source Material*. The Palestinian News and Info Agency-Wafa, today the PNA official press agency, also provided valuable archival resources on Palestinian institutions and factions.

Besides textual primary sources, this research also relied on interviews with current and former PFLP members and cadres, as well as with individuals with other political affiliations within the national movement. Oral sources have been consulted to gain insights on the PFLP's internal dynamics and on different orientations across different countries and generations. Interviews were thus conducted in Beirut, both in Palestinian refugee camps and in the offices of civil society organisations or study centres. Other conversations were held in the West Bank and mostly in Ramallah and the Deheishe refugee camp near Bethlehem. Further interviews were conducted in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The reliance on textual material entailed the definition of the appropriate method to best extract the desired information. To this end, the PFLP's literature has been approached following both diachronic and synchronic criteria. The extensive, diachronic reading of official documents over the timespan covered allowed to reconstruct the evolution of the PFLP's policy line and discourse, while identifying the recurring elements marking its political agency. This approach enabled the verification and detection of the PFLP's policy fluctuation through the comparison of the different positions adopted on sensitive issues. The diachronic reading of the PFLP's literature was combined with the synchronic reading of contemporary primary and secondary sources. More precisely, the information provided by the official documents was assessed against the background of both non-PFLP official documents and of the overall historiography on the Palestinian national movement. Such background was fundamental in putting the PFLP's agency, discourse and propaganda in

historical, spatial and political perspective. On the one hand this approach underscored the PFLP's interpretation of the main issues at stake for itself and the whole national movement. On the other, it also highlighted the PFLP's use of rhetoric, and more importantly, its inconsistencies dictated by multiple sources of pressure and dilemmas.

Oral sources were valuable in filling some of the gaps that textual sources left and in helping to test and evaluate the conclusions drawn from the documents. The information obtained from interviews has been cross-referenced with the available official literature. For instance, when approaching possible changes within the PFLP leadership and the rise to prominence of a given leader, the comments obtained from interviewees have been cross-checked with the "presence" of the given leader on the PFLP's official press. Interviews were run following a "semi-structured" model, implying that "key themes of the interview were previously identified and successively formulated as key questions".¹⁵ Strict adherence to the interview plan was avoided as a flexible approach ensured more familiarity with the interviewee who in turn was more likely to disclose the desired details. Ultimately, an interviewee plan was mainly needed to avoid excessive deviations in the conversation track as this risk emerged particularly with current PFLP members who tend to reproduce party narrative and evade sensitive issues.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapters 2 and 3 address the years between late 1982 up to late 1987 during which the PLO experienced its first major internal split. Chapter 2 focuses on the PFLP's agenda towards the PLO internal situation and on its attempts to build a "radical" alternative to Arafat's diplomatic strategy. At the Palestinian level, this alternative was based on the attempts to establish a leftist, nationalist front opposed to US sponsored peace plans. In its regional and international dimensions, as Chap. 3 shows, this line led the PFLP to seek closer relation with Syria and the USSR. In the attempt to implement this agenda, the PFLP demonstrated itself unable to conciliate the contradictory elements of its political agency. Consequently, the PFLP's line fluctuated between the rejection of Arafat's diplomatic strategy, the need to protect Palestinian autonomy from Syrian pressures and the fragmentation within the Palestinian Left. The PFLP's minor role in the ultimate failure of Arafat's strategy in 1987, along with its inability to

limit his growing power within the PLO, marked a first major step in the PFLP's marginalisation.

Chapter 4 covers the first half of the First Intifada which started in December 1987 as well as the preceding entrenchment of the PLO factions in the OPT. The different political balance existing among Palestinian factions in the OPT as well as the recovered PLO unity offered a valuable chance to renew the PFLP's action within Palestinian politics. However, several sources of pressure returned to haunt the PFLP, so that despite a certain positive pragmatism, it ultimately continued to swing between clashing thrusts. The opposition to Fatah's "concessions" in its diplomatic strategy and the concern for the maintenance of PLO unity, the emergence of the inside-outside divide and the rise to prominence of the Islamist "radical" alternative were the main sources of pressure behind the PFLP's fluctuations during this phase.

Chapter 5 examines the decade that saw the beginning of the peace process era. In particular, it addresses the PFLP's response to the 1993 Oslo accords and the implementation of the PNA's state-building process. In doing so, this chapter outlines the PFLP's shift from total rejection to acceptance of the post-Oslo political regime. Focusing on most of the 1990s, this chapter also deals with the PFLP's reaction to fateful events, from the 1991 Gulf War to the Soviet collapse. Coalition politics, tensions with other opposition factions and the inescapable push to institutional integration emerged as the main factors affecting the PFLP's line of action. In its account of the contradictions stemming from the PFLP's political orientations, Chap. 5 ultimately addresses the failure of its agenda and the ensuing efforts to reconcile with Fatah.

Chapter 6 tackles the years that asserted the PFLP's marginalisation through the unfolding of the 2000–05 Al-Aqsa Intifada and the evolution of the Hamas-Fatah split between 2006 and 2007. In covering the Al-Aqsa Intifada, this chapter outlines the PFLP's fluctuations and loss of relevance in relation to the dynamics marking the second Palestinian mass uprising, such as militarisation, Palestinian political fragmentation and growing Fatah-Hamas polarisation. The final part of this chapter approaches the PFLP's efforts to integrate the post-Intifada and, more significantly, the post-Arafat political scenario. In this phase, the opposition-integration dilemma continued to resurface as the PFLP continued to oscillate between the two sides of the Hamas-Fatah conflict. The ultimate alignment with the PNA demonstrated the prominence of integration within

the traditional hegemonic bloc, highlighting the PFLP's inability to disengage from a dysfunctional political framework.

Chapter 7 provides some analytical and theoretical considerations through the juxtaposition of the PFLP's trajectory to those of the Egyptian communist movement and the PKK. The goal is to examine similarities and differences in the management of shared conundrums, such as the relations with hegemonic nationalist allies or the elaboration of a genuine Marxist conception of national liberation. The study of the Egyptian case underscores how the renounce to formulate and embody a counterhegemonic platform to Nasser's dominant pan-Arab nationalism contributed to the communists' demise. Consequent to this renounce was the emergence of a fluctuating conduct that echoed the PFLP's opposition-integration dilemma. Conversely, the examination of the PKK's evolution highlights the adherence to a radical, revolutionary agenda as a crucial drive for survival and renewal. Paradigmatic changes in the PKK continued to serve its own interpretation of national liberation and societal transformation. This allowed the movement to resist competition within the Kurdish national movement and continue to mobilise popular support for its revolutionary platform.

THE PFLP'S IDEOLOGICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

The PFLP was officially founded on 11 December 1967, at the initiative of George Habash, a Palestinian physician hailing from Lydda, and other Palestinian and Arab activists mostly based in Lebanon. The great majority of the PFLP's leaders had been active within the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM), a Pan-Arab, transnational organisation that Habash himself helped to found in the early 1950s. Between the 1950s and the late 1960s, the ANM went through different phases marked by different ideological orientations. Upon foundation the ANM experienced a first Arab nationalist phase, in which the influence of pan-Arab intellectuals such as Michel Aflaq and Constantin Zureiq was predominant. Subsequently, Nasser's rise as symbol of pan-Arabism prompted the movement to move closer to his interpretation of Arab nationalism. Despite significant divisions, the ANM shifted towards the adoption of Arab socialism, marking a significant move towards the Left of the political spectrum. The 1967 Arab defeat in the June War against Israel compromised the