

PAUL THOMAS CHAMBERLIN

THE GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization,
and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order



The Global Offensive

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To my parents and my brother

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The Global Offensive

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

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

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



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

Further, a communist victory in South Vietnam would surely encourage Moscow and Beijing to pursue their revolutionary ambitions in other parts of the world. The conversation then turned to the Middle East: “You cannot separate what happens to America in Vietnam from the Mideast or from Europe or any place else,” he explained. The Soviets were moving into the area, which was already torn by conflicts between Israel and its neighbors and between moderates and radicals in the Arab world. Making matters worse, there now appeared to be an even more revolutionary force in Arab politics,

the Palestinian guerillas. Important as the struggle for Southeast Asia had been, Nixon warned at the end of the broadcast, the stakes and the dangers in the Middle East were even greater.²

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

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

Accordingly, this book locates the Palestinian armed struggle within the broad complex of liberationist forces scattered throughout the international system of the Cold War world. Viewed from this perspective, the era's myriad insurrections, revolts, and rebellions appear not as discrete episodes but as a linked, and at times even coordinated, series of assaults on the structures of global power. They were part of a unique moment in history when it appeared

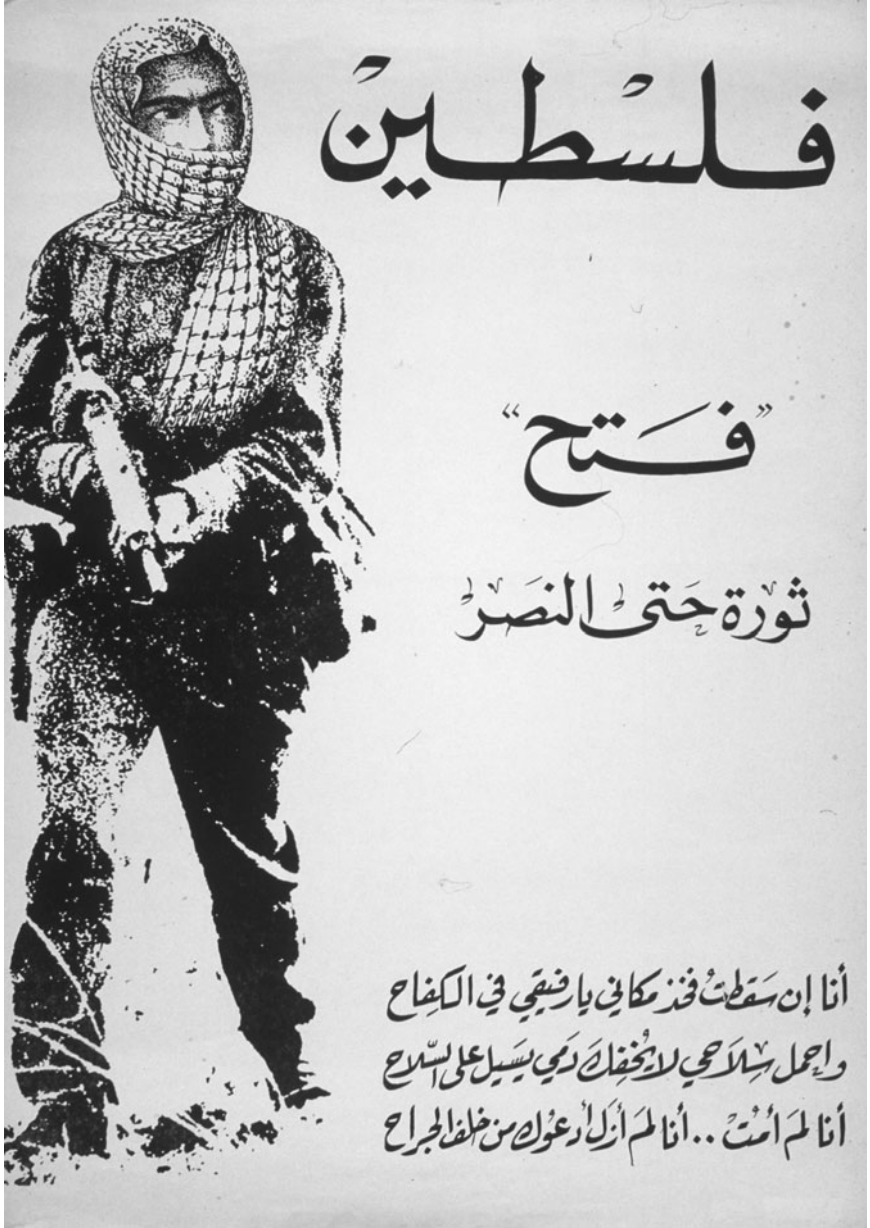


FIGURE 0.2 Fatah poster, “I Did Not Die,” c. 1967. Courtesy of the Palestinian Poster Project Archives.

as if progressive guerilla movements might seize control of the postcolonial world, in which more than 70 percent of the earth’s population resided. More than just isolated reactions to local circumstances and superpower politics, these uprisings had in common a vision of revolutionary politics drawn from

a shared culture of Third World national liberation.⁵ This is not to say that these movements were monolithic—indeed, a staggering diversity existed within their ranks over both time and space—but rather to draw attention to the many transnational connections, exchanges, and crossings that characterized national liberation. Guerilla fighters from Palestine, Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, and a dozen other locales can be understood as a sprawling constellation of revolutionary networks. Viewed from a distance, they appear as an international force in their own right, a global offensive against the bastions of state power in the Cold War system.

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

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

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

This battle for Palestine marked a turning point in the global Cold War whereby guerilla campaigns throughout the developing world would confront a new configuration of U.S. power. As their position in Vietnam deteriorated in the face of a concerted guerilla assault, officials in Washington scrambled to find the means to reinforce U.S. commitments throughout the Cold War periphery; they struggled to produce a post-Vietnam containment strategy for the developing world of the 1970s and beyond. The Nixon Doctrine, as this new configuration came to be known, was designed to hold the line against the string of guerilla offensives around the developing world through the creation of a network of local police powers. At the same time, Washington established a defensive position in the chambers of the United Nations, where it sought to counter the tide of Third Worldism—an amorphous, left-leaning political movement among the developing nations that emphasized the North-South divide in international affairs and sought to create greater solidarity among the nations of the postcolonial world—that was sweeping through the organization. Nowhere would these diplomatic and strategic transformations be more focused than in the Middle East, where the Nixon administration fortified its special relationship with Israel through enormous infusions of military aid and mobilized its veto power to shield its ally in the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger's diplomatic approaches to the Arab-Israeli conflict worked to accomplish a power shift in the Arab world away from alignment with Moscow and toward a new relationship with Washington.

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

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

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

As ever more multilingual, multiarchival studies appear, a more complete picture of international history is emerging that highlights the complex interplay of forces and agents across a truly global spectrum. Some of the most impressive scholarship in recent years has used European archives to deepen understandings of the Cold War in its transatlantic context, underscoring the role of the United States as merely one participant in a field crowded with rival powers, small states, and transnational actors all working toward their own ends. For studies of the postcolonial world and the global South, much more remains to be done, especially on those peoples and parts of the world that once fell under—or managed somehow to evade—the power of Western imperialism. Work utilizing non-Western sources has begun to move beyond the transatlantic focus on the great powers to incorporate Third World actors as dynamic agents in the creation of contemporary history.⁹

This effort is still in its early stages, however. A sizable majority of international histories written in English on the Arab-Israeli conflict, for instance, make virtually no use of Arabic materials. For decades, this was rationalized by citing the lack of official archives in Arab countries. This and similar explanations effectively silenced and ignored the voices of the majority of the human population whose affairs are not meticulously documented by the well-funded bureaucracies of the modern, usually Western state. In truth, the carefully preserved national archives maintained in places such as London, Paris, and Washington, DC, represent the exception, rather than the rule, in human history. And in recent years historians have produced whole schools of historiography on groups, such as Native Americans, that lacked the ability to produce and sustain official archives.¹⁰ In fact, the contemporary Middle East offers troves of materials that have gone virtually untouched by international historians, although the sources may appear somewhat barren in comparison to those available in the United States and much of Western Europe.¹¹ Until historians begin to make use of such sources, the Middle Eastern side of events will remain sorely underrepresented in Western scholarship.

Middle Eastern actors play a central role as dynamic agents in the chapters that follow. The roles of the great powers are not ignored, but this book underscores the interactions between guerillas, international organizations, nonstate groups, and small powers that long remained hidden on the Cold War “periphery.” Rather than being a comprehensive account of all involved participants, this book fits within the new international history in integrating the perspectives and roles of central—though previously neglected—players in world affairs.¹² In this spirit, it does not aim to present international history as an all-encompassing picture of every belligerent in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Key participants such as Israel, Egypt, and the Soviet Union appear frequently, but they are not the principal subjects. Rather, the book’s main objective is to analyze the international strategies of the groups that would form the PLO, situating them in the broader context of U.S. foreign policy, the Cold War, and

the global movement for national liberation. In doing so, it treats Palestinian fighters not as bit players but as central agents in the construction of the regional and international order that emerged in the 1970s and beyond.

By approaching the PLO in this manner, this work departs from the existing literature on the topic. One strand, represented by Middle East specialists, includes a number of excellent studies of Palestinian politics and society to which this work is deeply indebted. These works represent a Palestine-centric approach to the subject, which this study is not.¹³ The second group, consisting of historians of foreign relations and scholars of the Arab-Israeli conflict, tends to approach their subjects from U.S. and/or Israeli perspectives. Rather than focusing on Palestinian international history per se, these scholars concentrate on U.S.–Middle East relations or on the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict itself.¹⁴ A third body of work that deals extensively with the PLO focuses on the issue of “international terrorism.” Its focus on tactics does little to illuminate the larger dimensions of the Palestinian liberation movement that were central to its history. In contrast to these three types of works, this study moves beyond the regional framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict to focus on the international dimensions of the Palestinian armed struggle and place the PLO in the global context of revolutionary change during the Cold War era. In doing so, it seeks to return the story of the Palestinian liberation struggle to its appropriate place in the history of the twentieth-century world.

Given the highly politicized nature of the discussion that follows, some definitions are in order. The first concerns “terrorism,” which appears in the following pages as a historical concept rather than an analytical or objective one. The value of the term is vastly outweighed by the baggage it carries. “Terrorism” is problematic for a number of reasons. There is no definition of the term that is acceptable to most, let alone all, of the parties interested in its use. The concept has most often been employed as an accusation by groups seeking to undermine the legitimacy of their political opponents. If it can be said to have a usable definition as a military tactic or mode of violence, “terrorism” has a tendency to essentialize its subjects. Complex organizations with broad political platforms, aspirations, and goals and a wide range of constituents are reduced to “terrorists.” These three properties—ambiguity, delegitimation, and essentialization—have historically made the term a powerful rhetorical weapon. Thus, the charge of “terrorism” has been leveled by and against all of the major actors mentioned in the following chapters in connection with actions that do not fit most common definitions of the term. Instead, as journalist Robert Fisk has argued, “terrorism” is no longer an analytical concept but “a political contrivance. ‘Terrorists’ are those who use violence against the side that is using the word.”¹⁵ Still, there are those who argue that the concept can be rescued with the application of an objective, technical definition. Even if such a definition could be found and accepted, “terrorism” would still be subject to rampant misuse in mainstream parlance and would still be weighed

down by decades of historical baggage. Even when used in the most careful and dispassionate manner possible, the term invites misinterpretation. For these reasons, this book historicizes the term, treating “terrorism” as a historical artifact rather than as a legitimate concept to be applied objectively.

While I approach the topic of this book as a scholar and not as an activist, I fear that the politics of the Israel-Palestine dispute are likely to distract from my scholarship. For that reason, I feel that it would be helpful to establish my position at the outset. I agree with the prevailing precepts of international law that Israel has a right to exist and that the Palestinian people have a right to a sovereign state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moreover, like political scientist Mark Tessler, I believe that the conflict “is not a struggle between good and evil but rather a confrontation between two peoples who deserve recognition and respect, neither of whom has a monopoly on behavior that is either praiseworthy or condemnable.”¹⁶ During the period covered in this book, Israel was a state fighting for what it considered to be its very survival. At the same time, Palestinian fighters were struggling for their own national survival. Both groups faced what they believed were threats to their existence as nations; both groups behaved ruthlessly in defense of their claims and were responsible for acts of terrible violence against civilians. An honest treatment of the conflict must accept that neither side’s actions were the product of irrational hatreds or sectarian bloodlust. Rather, violence in the Israel-Palestine conflict was the result of considered—though at times misguided—strategies that the various parties followed in the hopes of maximizing their chances for national survival in a dangerous environment. These points should not be read as justifications for the bloodshed, nor do they imply some sort of judgment about the moral balance between the two sides. Instead, they serve as explanations that are essential for understanding the history of the conflict. The ideologically committed on both sides of the spectrum will disagree with this position, but nothing short of polemic is likely to satisfy such readers in any case.

The territory that has come to constitute Israel-Palestine also demands definition. The borders of Israel-Palestine were constructed in several stages over the course of modern history. The land of Palestine historically represented the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and formed three districts (*sanjaqs*) within the province (*vilayet*) of Syria under the Ottoman Empire. In 1920, Great Britain and France divided Ottoman Syria into separate mandates, with the French establishing the entities of Syria and Lebanon to the north and the British establishing Palestine and Transjordan in the south. These mandate boundaries would form the basis of the system of independent states that appeared after the departure of European imperial powers. Under British rule, two distinct communities had risen in Palestine, one Jewish and one Arab. While the Jewish population of Palestine constituted some 10 percent of the total at the turn of the century, by the late 1940s, as the British prepared to leave, it had risen to around 30 percent as the result of significant

immigration from Europe, spurred in no small part by the horrors of the Holocaust. In 1947, under strong pressure from the United States, the new United Nations put forward a plan for the partition of Palestine into two states. The proposed Jewish state would receive approximately 56 percent of Palestine, while the Arabs, who constituted some two-thirds of the population, would be left with only about 44 percent. The Arab population—who favored a one-state solution in which they would enjoy a controlling majority rather than a partition that would leave them with less than half of their homeland—rejected this plan for partition, citing the principle of self-determination, and the seeds for the First Arab-Israeli War were sown. That conflict, which lasted in various forms from 1947 to 1949, resulted in a victory for the newly formed state of Israel and the expansion of its borders to comprise some 78 percent of the former mandate of Palestine. The 1949 armistice lines became the *de facto* borders of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The total area of historic Palestine represented some 10,418 square miles, of which Israel constituted approximately 8,019 square miles, the West Bank just over 2,260 square miles, and the Gaza Strip approximately 139 square miles. These lines would come to be known as the 1967 borders and stood more or less intact on the eve of the Third Arab-Israeli War, which marks the beginning of this book.¹⁷

Finally, a short definition of the PLO and its constituent groups. The PLO is an umbrella organization first created in 1964 that brought together a number of different bodies. Prior to 1968, the PLO was largely under the control of the Egyptian government. Meanwhile, Fatah, created in 1959, brought together Palestinian nationalists such as Arafat who hoped to carve out an independent political role for their people. The third major force on the scene prior to 1967 was the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), which sought to marry the cause of Palestinian liberation to the wider pan-Arab struggle. While Fatah would continue to grow through the 1960s, the ANM declined, giving birth to the Popular Front groups, most notably George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Nayaf Hawatmeh's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). During the period in question, there were also myriad smaller guerilla groups, most of which existed for only a short time or were essentially proxies of Arab governments in the region. The most notable of this latter group were Al-Saiqa and the Arab Liberation Front (ALF), controlled by the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath parties, respectively. While these other groups appear, this book is primarily a study of the PLO, Fatah, and the PFLP. Finally, it should be noted that all of these groups were overwhelmingly secular; Islamic guerilla groups such as Hamas did not appear until later decades.

The following chapters are organized in a roughly chronological manner beginning in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and concluding at the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. The first two chapters look at the emergence of the Palestinian fedayeen into mainstream Arab politics in the wake of the

1967 war and Washington's initial response. By combining a vision of national liberation adopted from the Algerian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cuban examples with a series of guerilla operations, Palestinian fighters were able to gain regional and international prominence as well as the attention of U.S. officials, who were becoming increasingly concerned about the potential for the guerillas to destabilize the region. The fedayeen's political victory at the Battle of al-Karama would serve as a sort of Palestinian Tet Offensive, energizing the movement and guaranteeing the survival of the armed struggle. Chapter 3 analyzes the Nixon administration's response to the increasingly global threat of the Palestinian liberation struggle and the problem of revolutionary upheavals around the world. The president and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, set about laying the foundations for a post-Vietnam containment strategy that would hold the line against what appeared to be a series of revolutions in the developing world and erase the PLO from the global map of national liberation fighters. Chapter 4 examines the climactic 1970 showdown between the PLO and the U.S.-backed Hashemite monarchy in Jordan. Although Jordanian security forces maintained control of the kingdom, the conflict demonstrated the urgency of Palestinian nationalism as a force in the Arab world and thrust Arafat and the PLO onto the international stage.

Chapters 5 and 6 chart the shift in the PLO's strategies in the wake of the Jordanian war, the emergence of the Black September Organization—responsible for the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre—and the U.S. response to the problem of international guerilla warfare. This new stage of the conflict would be marked by the full internationalization of the PLO's armed struggle and the rise of the "terrorism versus freedom fighter" controversy in forums such as the United Nations. Meanwhile, the United States and Israel would work to introduce unilateral tactics—diplomatic and military—to deal with the challenge of the PLO's global insurgency. The final chapter examines the period from the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War to the beginning of the Lebanese civil war. As the PLO secured the political high ground in the international sphere, winning world recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, it grappled with the challenge of moving its armed struggle into the diplomatic sphere and worked to establish an official dialogue with Washington. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies established political and military authority in the region and moved to lock the PLO out of the official peace process spearheaded by Henry Kissinger. The resulting stalemate between the opposing sides would continue for decades. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict hardened, Lebanon descended into civil war, and hopes for a post-1967 settlement faded away.

The PLO's paradoxical fate would be a bellwether for the national liberation struggles of the post-Vietnam era. The new generation of Third World revolutionaries would run up against superpower-proxy forces trained and equipped to wage low-intensity conflicts, sparking a string of bloody but indecisive

guerilla wars around the global South. In Angola, warring factions supported by the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and South Africa would fight one of the longest civil wars of the Cold War era. Right-wing regimes would use military aid from Washington to wage a series of brutal counterinsurgencies against left-wing guerillas in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Colombia. The Reagan White House pushed these low-intensity conflict strategies one step further in the 1980s, when it began channeling funds and weapons to guerilla forces in Nicaragua and Afghanistan fighting against left-wing governments in Managua and Kabul. Meanwhile, as the PLO was pulled into the carnage of the Lebanese civil war, the goal of Palestinian statehood grew more distant and the impetus for liberation shifted to new segments of Palestinian society that would challenge the PLO in the decades to come. While it appeared as if Washington and its allies around the developing world had found the means to stop the revolutionary dominoes from falling, the post-Cold War era promised to be every bit as fraught with conflict as the half century that had preceded it.

What follows, then, is a history of the PLO's global offensive, the U.S. response, and the making of the contemporary international order during the pivotal years between 1967 and 1975. It examines the way that a group of Palestinian refugees managed to launch a national liberation movement that seized the world's attention and helped to rewrite the rule book for revolutionaries around the globe. It also explains how the world's greatest superpower recalibrated its international security strategies to meet the challenges of this global offensive and shore up its position throughout the global South. In the end, it is neither a story of triumph nor a tale of defeat but rather a chronicle of stalemate and the origins of a guerilla war that would last into the twenty-first century.

The Struggle Against Oppression Everywhere

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War was over in less than a week. A devastating air attack against the Egyptian air force on June 5 had all but guaranteed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) control of the air for the rest of the conflict. It would take Israel only five more days to cut a swath through the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies, occupy the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, and lay waste to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabist dreams. Nasser's tragedy would open the door for a new revolutionary force in the region, however. While he could hardly have been happy with the situation, Yasir Arafat recognized the opportunity that unfolded as the guns fell silent. Arafat had spent a good deal of the previous summer locked up with several of his comrades in Syria's al-Mezzah prison after running afoul of Defense Minister Hafiz al-Assad. The yoke of Egyptian and Syrian patronage weighed heavily on the guerilla leader's shoulders: while the Arab states lauded Palestinian commandos in public and supplied them with much-needed cash and weapons, leaders such as Nasser and Assad expected obedience and deference from the fedayeen. As the shattered Arab armies gathered their wounded and marched back to their respective capitals, Arafat and his comrades moved to throw off the crumbling remains of Nasserism and push their own version of revolutionary Palestinian nationalism to the fore. As Arafat would console a fellow guerilla commander, "This is not the end. It's the beginning."¹

Although his small stature did not fit the image of the fearsome guerilla commander that he hoped to project, Arafat was a sort of Palestinian everyman. Born in Cairo in 1929 to a Gazan merchant and a woman from Jerusalem, the young Arafat witnessed the final decades of British colonial rule in the Middle East. While he spent several years in Jerusalem, Arafat came of age in Cairo, the pulsing heart of the Arab world and one of the centers of the global movements against European colonialism. He became involved in politics early, joining popular demonstrations against British rule on the streets of Cairo at the age of ten.

In 1948, he joined units of the Ikhwan Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood) fighting in Gaza against Zionist forces in the First Arab-Israeli War. After returning to Egypt and his engineering studies at Cairo University, Arafat became involved in the Palestinian Students Union (PSU) and was elected its president in 1952. His work with the PSU—for which he gained a reputation as a skilled organizer—brought him into contact with a number of other young activists as well as the Egyptian secret police, who were suspicious of possible challenges to the new revolutionary regime. In 1957, after earning his degree, Arafat left Cairo for the less stifling political atmosphere of Kuwait. Like many members of the Palestinian diaspora, he found success abroad but still longed for a homeland. Arafat ran a successful construction company, developed a fondness for fast cars, and continued his political activities, founding the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, known by its reverse acronym, Fatah. Espousing a nebulous ideology of Palestinian nationalism mixed with revolutionary Third World liberation and left-wing social thought, Fatah called for a guerilla war designed to liberate Palestine and for the creation of a Palestinian state. The group's clandestine activities were originally limited in scope, but by publishing a number of periodicals and having its members travel widely, it was able to win an increasing number of Palestinian recruits as well as international supporters.²

Fatah was not the only competitor for political leadership of the Palestinian diaspora, however. The biggest challenge came from the Arab states themselves and the Palestine Liberation Organization, created in 1964 as a means for the Arab regimes—Cairo in particular—to retain a measure of control over the Palestinians and the issue of Palestinian liberation. By creating the PLO as an essentially toothless organization, Nasser had hoped to bolster the perception that his regime was working toward Palestinian liberation when it was in fact retreating from the more radical dimensions of Arab nationalism. The organization functioned largely as a foil led by the volatile Ahmed Shuqairy, famous for his pledge to “drive the Jews into the sea.” Indeed, it was in response to the creation of the PLO—and the fear that the cause of Palestinian liberation would continue to be overshadowed by the larger cause of Arab nationalism—that Arafat was able to convince his colleagues in Fatah to begin a series of guerilla attacks against Israel in January 1965. Such fears were not unreasonable. Prior to the mid-1960s, the Palestinian liberation movement had been largely subsumed under the umbrella of Arab nationalism. While tensions between Jews and Arabs had dominated Palestinian politics during the 1940s and 1950s, the major Arab states including Syria, Egypt, and Iraq had experienced social revolutions that had brought new elites to power, replacing the traditional classes of urban notables who had dominated Arab political life under the Ottoman sultans and the European mandate system. Thus, while Nasser's star rose in Cairo and Ba'athist officials consolidated power in Damascus and Baghdad, post-World War II Palestinian society lacked clear political leadership.³

This was the sociopolitical atmosphere in which Arafat came of age. Although his troubles with Cairo and Damascus made his task more difficult—he needed to look no further than his recent incarceration in a Syrian prison—Arafat had the advantage of being connected to a number of international networks of political, material, and ideological exchange. From his youth, Arafat had witnessed a surging anticolonial movement that linked groups around the non-Western world. The shared experience of colonialism and common struggle against European imperialism had laid the foundations for what would become known as the Third World during the post-1945 era. Likewise, his experience fighting in Gaza alongside members of the Ikhwan Muslimun had exposed the young Arafat to cultural currents that flowed across national boundaries and united groups around the Middle East. His work with the PSU during his time at Cairo University brought him into contact with socialist and communist groups that were at the forefront of nationalist movements around the region and the developing world. Finally, his time working as a businessman in Kuwait left Arafat with an awareness of the power of international finance and the growing role of oil money in the Arab world. The net effect of these experiences created a man who was well acquainted with the dominant transnational political forces of the Palestinian, Arab, and developing worlds. Arafat was not the only player looking to lead the way to Palestinian liberation, however.

Born into a family of Greek Orthodox merchants in the Palestinian city of Lydda in 1926, George Habash showed a great deal of promise, leaving his homeland to study pediatric medicine at the American University of Beirut. On a visit home in 1948, Habash was caught in the Jewish attack on Lydda and, along with his family, forced to leave the city in the mass expulsion that came to be known as the Lydda Death March. He returned to Beirut as a refugee to finish his studies, graduating first in his class in 1951. The following year, he became a founding member of the Arab Nationalist Movement, a left-wing anti-imperialist organization that sought to create a revolutionary vanguard in the Arab world. That same year, the man who was to become known as the “doctor of the Palestinian revolution” moved to Amman, where he opened a clinic for refugees. Like many of his contemporaries, Habash was attracted to Nasser and his message of Arab unity. By the early 1960s, the ANM had become a principal competitor to Arafat’s group. In contrast to the more narrowly Palestinian Fatah, the ANM embraced a pan-Arab vision aimed not just at establishing an Arab state in Palestine but also at bringing about a political revolution throughout the Arab world. The Arab defeat in 1967 dealt a devastating blow to Habash and the ANM, however, leading to the fragmentation of the movement and a turn away from Arab states such as Egypt. In December 1967, Habash and several of his colleagues created the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.⁴

Beyond opening the door for new leaders such as Habash and Arafat, Nasser’s humiliation raised fears that the Arab powers might abandon the

Palestinian cause by granting recognition to Israel in exchange for the return of territories occupied by the IDF during the war. If Israel could be persuaded to return to its prewar frontiers, Cairo, Damascus, and Amman might cut their losses and accept a political settlement with Israel. Such a settlement appeared a very real possibility in late 1967, as both the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to set aside their differences and back UN efforts to bring about a negotiated peace. Security Council Resolution 242, passed in November 1967, established a framework for peace based on the principle of the exchange of land for political recognition. Under the efforts of Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring, the United Nations encouraged Israel to evacuate Arab territories occupied during the June War in return for peace with the Arab states. The resolution called for a settlement of the refugee problem, but not the recognition of Palestinian political aspirations. While seemingly minor, this semantic distinction was fundamental to the issue of Palestinian nationalism: Arab refugees could be resettled in any one of the many Arab states, while Palestinians were a nation entitled to sovereignty and self-determination. Indeed, the reference to the Palestinians as Arab refugees could lead to the denial of their very existence as a people. To this end, the struggle to secure recognition as a nation functioned as the first and most basic goal of the Palestinian resistance movement. Had the Jarring Mission succeeded, Palestinian hopes for self-determination might have been left out in the cold.⁵

The Jarring Mission would run into a number of obstacles, however. The most basic dilemma arose from Israel's lopsided victory in 1967, which left the Jewish state with too much leverage in any potential negotiations. Israeli leaders, with some justification, fell into the habit of thinking that their state was militarily invincible. Thus, while they were amenable in theory to the land-for-peace settlement, the particulars of any prospective settlement presented significant hurdles to progress. Growing pressure within the Jewish state to consolidate control over occupied Arab territories compounded matters. Control of the Sinai, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank increased Israel's strategic depth dramatically: future wars, should they break out, would be fought on these battlefields rather than within Israel itself. The presence of Judaism's holiest shrines in Jerusalem and cultural attachments to the West Bank—manifest in a growing political constituency that demanded annexation of these lands—made the wholesale return of that territory even more difficult to accomplish. These forces became stronger as Israeli settlers began seizing Arab territory, usually without state support, with the intention of creating Eretz Yisrael (a greater Israel) upon the conquests of the June War. On balance, at the end of 1967, Israeli leaders faced as much or more pressure to retain control over Arab lands as they did to return them.

Conversely, this situation provided little incentive for Arab regimes in Egypt and Syria to seek a political settlement in which they would be negotiating for the return of their territory from a position of extreme weakness. Better to

wait until the situation became more favorable to their interests, leaders in Damascus and Cairo concluded. Hence, at the September 1967 Khartoum Conference, the Arab League issued the famous “three noes”: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiation with Israel. At its most basic, the dilemma between Israel and the Arab states focused on the fact that Israel had too much leverage in the negotiations with its Arab neighbors; neither side felt inclined to press for negotiations. For their part, officials in Washington were preoccupied with the war in Southeast Asia. The Johnson administration thus did not throw its full weight behind Jarring’s efforts, seeking to manage rather than resolve the regional situation. The fedayeen would emerge as the strongest Arab critics of the Jarring Mission.

From Arab Refugees to Third World Liberation Fighters

As the dust settled from the June War, Arafat and several of his lieutenants slipped across the Jordan River and into the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Convinced that the defeat of the Arab armies confirmed the necessity of waging a protracted guerilla war of attrition against Israel, Arafat made his way to the old quarter of the city of Nablus to set up a base of operations. Fatah’s operations in the summer of 1967 marked a watershed around the region, one that would be followed by revolutionary transformations in Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, but few groups were more deeply affected than the nearly 1 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who suddenly found themselves living under Israeli military occupation. For these Palestinians, the experience of the 1967 war represented a new tragedy. Scattered since the 1948 war, the Palestinians had been geographically separated, with an estimated 600,000 living in the West Bank, 300,000 in Gaza, and 300,000 in Israel, and another 880,000 living in refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Some 280,000 Palestinians were spread around the Arab world—mainly in the oil-rich gulf states of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—with approximately 150,000 others living outside the Arab world.⁶ The largest concentration of Palestinians, on the West Bank, had lived under Jordanian rule for nearly two decades; Gazans lived under Egyptian authority. The greater part of the diaspora—like most of their fellow Arabs—had been gripped by Nasser’s pan-Arab message since the mid-1950s. This enthusiasm for Cairo combined with the absence of any formal state structures to create a lack of clear leadership over Palestinian society. Traditional social elites—the urban notables—still held a considerable amount of power on the West Bank. Their influence was eroding under the new IDF occupation, however, as it became clear that they could do little to contest Israeli control. The pressure of occupation would become a catalyst for change in the diaspora. While the old elite families of the West Bank had been losing power, the dynamic political force of radicals in the refugee camps had

been growing. It was out of this milieu that groups such as Fatah, the ANM, and the PFLP would emerge. In the years following the 1967 war, Palestinian society would become a battleground between the forces of traditional authority and their revolutionary challengers.⁷

If they were to build an enduring political movement, upstarts such as Arafat and Habash needed to establish their political legitimacy in such a way as to offer a viable alternative to the largely discredited Arab nationalism emanating from Cairo and Damascus. Thus both Arafat and Habash would look further afield for examples of successful revolutionary movements to serve as models for the rising Palestinian armed struggle. This was an auspicious time for aspiring guerillas. Radical movements, social protest, and political turmoil were on the rise around the world in the late 1960s as the postwar generation came of age in the First, Second, and Third Worlds. While the First and Second Worlds split into two opposing blocs in the Cold War rivalry, the Third World emerged as the product of decolonization. Composed of dozens of postcolonial states, the Third World functioned more as a political project than as a geographic space. In its most general sense, that project represented the demands of the formerly colonized nations for political equality, but its character was in a nearly continuous state of flux.⁸

The first wave of postcolonial nationalism—the Bandung Generation—had lost much of its energy by the mid-1960s. Meanwhile, rising on the Third World political scene was a younger set of postcolonial leaders who were less enamored with the visions of state-based development and nonaligned foreign policy than their predecessors. The Cuban and Algerian revolutions had added a new revolutionary flavor to the cause of Third World liberation, while the spectacle of the Vietnamese people challenging American military might in Southeast Asia had become a rallying cry for revolutionaries around the world. To some observers, the nature of social revolution seemed to be changing as its pace quickened: the Cuban and Algerian experiences suggested the possibility of a new model of revolution built around the concept of urban guerilla warfare rather than a mass proletarian uprising. Under this new model, the guerillas operating in the cities would create the conditions for the revolution rather than waiting for them to materialize on their own.⁹ These wars of national liberation in the Third World spawned a radical literature that quickly circulated through the international system and became a sort of canon for revolutionaries. Palestinian fighters sought to apply the principles of writers such as Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Che Guevara to their own liberation struggle.

Leaders such as Arafat would gravitate toward these models of national liberation through guerilla war. In their one meeting with Che Guevara in 1964 at the Hotel Atteli in Algiers, Fatah officials apparently charmed the Argentine guerilla commander, who expressed his surprise that the Palestinians had not started their own armed struggle and promised Cuban solidarity if they did.¹⁰

This association with Third World revolutionaries would shape the ideological orientation of groups such as Fatah and serve to differentiate them from Arab states such as Egypt and Syria. In August 1967, Fatah published fourteen pamphlets under the series title *Revolutionary Studies and Experiences*, outlining the basic policy positions of the resistance movement. In addition to titles such as *How to Launch the People's Armed Revolution* and *The Revolution and the Road to Victory*, the series contained three pamphlets devoted to the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions, plus a shorter study on the Algerian revolution. The booklets portrayed the group as a fundamentally cosmopolitan organization with spiritual ties to revolutionaries around the Third World; the Palestinian resistance identified its struggle as one front in a global war against the forces of imperialism and neoimperialism taking place around the Third World. The booklets were part of a concerted effort by the guerillas to bolster the transnational dimensions of their movement. That a struggling resistance movement should devote such substantial resources to the study of the wider world reveals the importance of international events in shaping regional politics in what was becoming an increasingly global order. Arafat was intent upon the goal of liberating the Palestinian movement from the "stranglehold of Arab tutelage" under which it had operated for the previous two decades. Another pamphlet from late 1967, entitled *The Relationship of the Palestinian Revolution with the Arab Revolution and the World Revolution*, also tried to distance Palestinian nationalism from its wider Arab counterpart and explain the links between Palestinian and Third World revolutionary movements.¹¹

More than simply propaganda, these manuals constituted a clear articulation of Fatah's strategy of revolution—if not military tactics. This shift away from Cairo and Damascus as model struggles underscored the fundamental differences between the Palestinian guerillas and the older Arab nationalists, reinforcing arguments for an independent Palestinian nationalism. Likewise, Fatah began its study of revolutionary warfare with the Chinese example rather than the Bolsheviks. Using Mao's example of a people's liberation war as a starting point, Palestinian cadres then turned to the Cuban model of *foco* warfare, Algerian theories of urban guerilla war, and finally the Vietnamese innovations of people's war that called for the creation of a general offensive and uprising. These examples of revolutionary war in the Third World inspired Palestinian fighters. In time, the fedayeen would join the ranks of these theorists of revolutionary warfare with their own version of guerilla war.¹²

Both the PFLP and Fatah's writings reflected this revolutionary cosmopolitan worldview. As they published newspapers, magazines, and books, the guerillas narrated their own national experience and, in doing so, reimagined the Palestinian community as a stateless nation of liberation fighters rather than a group of Arab refugees and a propaganda tool of the regimes in Cairo and Damascus. As the guerilla press constructed a vision of the outside world, it self-consciously represented the Palestinian struggle as a Third World

resistance movement, circulating throughout the Palestinian diaspora notions of radical liberation through armed struggle. The idea that Palestinian activists would embrace Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban leaders as the ideological inspiration for their revolution represented a rebellion against the imagined geography of the Cold War order. Geographic distinctions had been set in place as Western empires extended political control over the larger world and divided it into regions. These geographical units were demarcated as much by Western interests and conceptions of the world as they were by actual boundaries. Just as this process of mapping accompanied the extension of European empires, the retreat of those empires witnessed a process of de-mapping as postcolonial actors imposed their own geographies. The fedayeen's appropriation of transnational revolutionary ideologies was in many ways symptomatic of the rise of a new vision of global order and of a wider transnational political consciousness.

An awareness of this consciousness is evident in the publications of the guerilla press, which targeted a diverse range of audiences. The first of these consisted of the fedayeen themselves. The various guerilla organizations produced publications intended for military and political training, indoctrination, and news. The guerillas also published for the wider Palestinian diaspora in the refugee camps, the occupied territories, and the Arab world. The other Arab states and their populations represented a third audience for the fedayeen's public information apparatus. These publications were not published solely in Arabic; a substantial portion of the guerillas' public materials appeared in English and French and was aimed at the broader world community and designed to engender support for the fedayeen's struggle. Likewise, the guerillas' public diplomacy efforts in international forums such as the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organization of African Unity were directed toward a global audience. Although guerilla leaders were initially skeptical about the ability of these global information campaigns and the international community to redress their grievances, these efforts would develop into a key dimension of the Palestinian struggle in later years.

While the superpower rivalry dominated Western visions of international affairs, actors in the developing world focused on the divide between rich and poor nations and the split between the postcolonial world and the former imperial powers. Arafat embraced this new global political geography. The Palestinians together with the Cubans, Chinese, Algerians, and Vietnamese were associated with the forces of liberation, while Israel—with its ties to the United States, Rhodesia, and South Africa—was allied with the forces of imperialism.¹³ “As we know,” Salah Khalaf (aka Abu Iyad), Fatah's second in command, explained, “the world is in practice divided into three parts: The Eastern Camp, the Western Camp and the Third World.”¹⁴ Here was a worldview that moved beyond the binary Cold War divide to focus on the importance of the global South.