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**The Background of Oslo:
An Analysis of the Context and
Choices of the Palestinian Leadership**

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Abstract

After three decades, it can be safely said that the Oslo Process has been abandoned, and it is unlikely to be resumed, considering the current Israeli government and the violence we see daily in Gaza and the West Bank. Therefore, it would be interesting to analyse the context that led to the negotiations and their context. Specifically, this thesis aims to explore the context and factors that pushed the PLO to engage in the negotiation process that would lead to the Oslo Accords, and how the choices made by these actors impacted the negotiations, their outcomes and the overall Process.

To do so, the thesis will firstly examine the context of the region in the '80s and early '90s and the events that directly impacted the decisions of the PLO. This section is not intended to be a complete examination of this period, but rather an analysis of how these events impacted the PLO and its position in relation to its allies and especially to the US and Israel. Given this context, it will try to analyse which factors, interactions and decisions pushed the PLO leadership to enter bilateral negotiations with the Israelis. The last part of the thesis will be focused, in light of the findings of the previous section, on exploring the Oslo Process, trying to link specific aspects of its provisions to the motivations and decisions of the PLO before and during the negotiations phase. Furthermore, I think that these factors could also help explain some of the shortcomings of the Oslo Accords, which I will also focus on in the latter part of the thesis.

The thesis will utilise both secondary and primary sources, the former more to illustrate the historical context, while the latter will be used in the second part regarding the motivations and decisions of the PLO leadership. The thesis will employ a constructivist point of view, which is well-suited to explore the ideas and beliefs of the actual people behind the beginning of the Oslo Process.

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Introduction

The Oslo Peace Process was inaugurated on the White House lawn in September 1993, after almost ten months of secret negotiations hosted by members of the Norwegian government.

In its proponents' ideas, the Process was supposed to help reduce the violence and mitigate the difficulties in the occupied Palestinian Territories (oPT). This would promote an atmosphere of cooperation and trust, which would in turn facilitate the discussions on the so-called final status issues, namely the most contentious issues of the Palestinian Question, such as Jerusalem or the Palestinian refugees.

But the reality was that mistrust and misconception plagued the discussion since the beginning, and soon it became clear that the Process would not be able to reach its stated objectives.

To understand why one of the most comprehensive attempts at tackling the Palestinian Question failed, it is interesting to explore the factors that pushed the PLO leadership to start the negotiations, rather than analysing the conduct of the Palestinian team involved in the Process.

This is because it can be argued that many of the problems that emerged within the Palestinian side during the period of intense diplomatic contacts between it and the Israeli side can be traced back to trends and choices that happened in some cases long before the start of these contacts. Namely, the central position of Yāsir 'Arafāt as Chairman of the PLO and its choices often fundamentally shaped the course of the Palestinian resistance movement, and its interaction with international and regional events.

In fact, the analysis of these choices and the context in which they developed and that they influenced will be useful not only to explain what led to the beginning of the Oslo channel and its evolution into a formal process, but also to explain some of the behaviour of the Palestinian leaders and politicians during the second half of the '90s, which was the period when the discussion took place and ultimately failed.

Although it can be argued that this failure was the result of the choices and attitudes of all the actors involved in the Palestinian Question, including the international ones, this thesis focuses on the Palestinian side and its reaction to the evolving context from the 1980s up until the beginning of the direct negotiations with Israel in 1993.

These choices not only impacted the progression of the Peace Process and the creation of the first Palestinian self-governing institutions in the Territories, but the consequences of those choices still shape Palestinian politics today, and more importantly, the most recent events concerning Israeli actions in Gaza and the West Bank.

The approach of 'Arafāt and the PLO leadership to the Oslo Peace Process contributed in part to the lack of comprehension between the two sides, which, in turn, together with other relevant factors that are, however, outside the scope of this thesis, generated an atmosphere of mistrust that ultimately led to the failure of the whole Process.

This failure and the reciprocal accusations of the Israelis and Palestinians contributed to the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which took the shape of a new wave of violence, which saw the rise of a more religious-ethnic dimension beside the more nationalist one based on land, borders and the principles of international law.

Furthermore, the attitudes of the PLO leadership developed during the period in question, other than being decisive for the beginning and the conclusion of the Oslo Process, also contributed to the nature of the relationship with the other nascent actor of Palestinian politics, namely the militant Islamist groups, of which Ḥamas is the most famous representative.

The initial attempts at cooperation or understanding between the Islamists and the PLO during the '80s were soon replaced by intense competition to secure the Palestinians' support. This rivalry intensified during the years of the Palestinian Authority (PA), to then materialise in the split between Faṭḥ and Ḥamas after the 2006 election, and the consequent division of the PA into two rival governments respectively in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

This event, together with the failure of the Oslo Process, led to the crystallisation of Palestinian politics, the recurring outbreaks of attacks from and towards the Gaza Strip, and the Israeli creeping expansion and violence in the West Bank.

One can therefore see how today's situation, which sees these trends extended to a much greater and accelerated scale, is directly connected to long-standing trends in Palestinian politics, which are also the same that led 'Arafāt to begin the negotiations with the Israelis in Norway.

For this reason, identifying and analysing these trends will be useful not only to understand why the PLO leadership decided to engage in serious diplomatic contacts with Tel Aviv, but also why the diplomacy failed, and how this failure laid the foundations for the most recent development of the Palestinian Question.

To do so, the first chapter will examine the context of the region in the '80s and early '90s and the events that directly impacted the decisions of the PLO. The analysis will start from the end of the 1970s to arrive at the signing of the Oslo I Agreement in 1993.

This section is not intended to be a complete examination of this period, but rather an analysis of how these events impacted the PLO and its position in relation to its allies and especially to the US and Israel.

Given this context, the second chapter will analyse which factors, interactions and decisions pushed the PLO leadership, which was largely composed of Faṭḥ members, to enter bilateral negotiations with the Israelis.

This analysis will focus on the consequences of the two most relevant events of the late '80s and early '90s, namely the First Intifāda and the Gulf War, but also on the reaction of 'Arafāt to the Madrid Conference and the worsening condition of the Palestinian Territories.

The last chapter of the thesis will be focused, in light of the findings of the previous sections, on exploring the Oslo Peace Process, trying to link specific aspects of its evolution to the motivations and decisions of the PLO before and during the negotiations phase.

The different conceptions of the Israeli and the Palestinian leaderships concerning the scope and final aim of the Peace Process, the scarce involvement of the respective populations, the corrupt and repressive institutions of the Palestinian Authority and the growing opposition of the Palestinians are all factors that led to the downfall of diplomacy, and that can also be seen as the results of the trends and choices identified in the previous chapters.

The methodology of this thesis will mainly consist of the qualitative analysis of primary sources, such as documents and speeches, containing policies and plans produced by different sides during the years under examination, as well as the most complete and authoritative literature on the history of the Palestinian resistance movement and of its actors, mainly the PLO and its most important members and leaders.

Furthermore, several sources discussing the events and themes of the Palestinian Question and of the Oslo Peace Process will be used to confirm the hypothesis of the thesis.

These studies will consist both of secondary sources written by both Western and Arabic scholars based on primary sources such as interviews, internal documents, local medias and on-the-ground research, but also of biographies, memoirs and first-hand accounts of mostly Palestinian academics, journalists and politicians present, and often involved, at critical junctures of the period in question.

These would be particularly useful to understand which were the context in which the Palestinian leadership formulated the policies concerning the diplomatic strategy of the PLO, as well as which factors were the most decisive in their choices.

Since the analysis of this thesis will focus, in addition to the study of the recent history of the Palestinian resistance movement, on the perception and elaboration of these events by the Palestinians leaders, this thesis will adopt a constructivist theoretical framework. This will allow this study to attribute the right importance to the beliefs and perceptions of the protagonists of Palestinian politics and of the Peace Process, which would otherwise be overlooked by other theoretical approaches.

As a final note, this thesis has striven to adhere to a transliteration of Arabic terms that respects, for what is possible, the original pronunciation. This has been applied to Arabic terms, persons' proper names, names of organisations which are routinely mentioned with their Arabic names instead of their English ones, and geographical names that do not have an established spelling in English.

Chapter I

The path to the Oslo negotiations

To understand the motivations behind the decision of 'Arafāt to engage in the Oslo negotiations, it is necessary to analyse the trajectory of the Palestinian resistance movement, and specifically of its main actor, the PLO, in the years preceding this event.

To do this, this chapter will start with the situation in 1978, after the conclusion of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. This date is significant not only because it represents the first breach of the unified Arab front against Israel, moreover by one of its leading states, but also because, in reaction to this, the PLO decided to enhance the process of building those state apparatuses that would characterise its existence in the following years.

The chapter will begin on this date and arrive at the conclusion of the Oslo track with the Declaration of Principles of 1993. The opening paragraphs will explore the construction of the Palestinian "state-within-a-state" in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon and around Beirut in the late '70s and early '80s, and the following trauma of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, with the consequent evacuation of the PLO leadership from Beirut towards Tunis. After that, the chapter will explore the challenging period of the 1980s, marked by internal disputes, splits, attempts by Arab states to impose tutelage on the PLO, and failed diplomatic efforts. The conclusion will then be focused on the two cardinal events of the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s: the First Intifāda and the Gulf War, and how the consequences of these two events would represent the final push toward what would become the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Accords.

The aim of this chapter is not to study these events in a definitive way, but rather to understand how they have influenced the policies and objectives of the PLO, and especially of its leadership. In addition to this, the analysis of the almost fifteen years that separate Camp David and Oslo allows for the identification of several trends in Palestinian internal politics. The process of transforming the PLO from a resistance movement to a quasi-state was a response to the peace between Egypt and Israel, but soon started to have deep impacts on its internal functioning: the power of the Chairman and Fath grew, thanks to the capillary control of the new PLO apparatuses. But these also caused the growth of neo-patrimonialism and corruption, and a growing dependence on outside funding by rich Arab states.

Furthermore, the idea that a solution to the conflict with Israel would come through a negotiated solution based on Palestinian control restricted to roughly the 1967 border gained increasing traction. This changed the strategies and balances inside the

organisation, leading to a search for international legitimacy, especially in the West, and attempts at direct negotiations, mainly directed at the US.

It is through the perspective of these two main interconnected trends, statehood and diplomacy, that it is useful to study this period to construct a framework for the analysis of the following chapters.

1. From 1978 to 1982: Lebanon and the state-in-exile

The beginning of 1978 presented the PLO with several challenges, but also some advantages compared to the previous years: in 1977, Egyptian President 'Anwar as-Sādāt made a surprise visit to Jerusalem, which led to the Camp David summit and the subsequent meetings the following year. Furthermore, in March, Israel invaded southern Lebanon up to the Litani River, retreating after the establishment of a buffer zone guarded by UN peacekeepers. These two events recomposed both the Arab front, with a renewed unity behind the PLO, excluding Egypt, and in the PLO itself, recomposing the split that originated from the 1974 “phased strategy” program and pausing the violent internal struggle between factions.

The peace process between Israel and Egypt, and its entanglement with the Palestinian conflict, started after the 1973 War with the Geneva Peace Conference, but received an impulse in 1977, when Egyptian president 'Anwar as-Sādāt announced his visit to Jerusalem. The following year, in September, the two countries signed the two Camp David Accords: the first proposing a solution for the occupied Palestinian Territories, and the second aimed at concluding a peace agreement between Cairo and Tel Aviv. This agreement was signed in March of 1979¹, marking the first breach of the united Arab front against Israel.

The reaction from the other Arab states was harsh, especially from the radical republican regimes: after as-Sādāt's visit to Jerusalem, a meeting in Tripoli in December 1977 between 'Arafāt, the other factions of the PLO, and the governments of Libya, Syria, Algeria, and South Yemen produced a statement announcing the creation of the *Steadfastness and Confrontation Front*. The statement also called for the boycott of Egypt and an end to diplomatic relations with it, while reiterating the rejection of UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and the participation in any negotiated solution to the Palestinian Question, such as the Geneva Conference or the Camp David framework². In November 1978, the Arab

¹ “Overall Chronology”, Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1979, <https://www.palquest.org/en/overallchronology?show=intro>.

² Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 424-25.

League voted to condemn the Camp David Accords and pledged financial aid to the PLO and the confrontation states, but avoided expelling Egypt from the League, only suspending it³. The expulsion came a year later in March, when, in reaction to the signing of the peace treaty, the League imposed heavy sanctions, including the end of diplomatic relations and a complete economic boycott⁴.

The PLO leadership was in a delicate situation, with both advantages and limitations: the positive aspects were that the Arab states had recompacted in favour of the PLO and pledged to sustain it economically. Furthermore, the inclusion of the PLO inside the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front had recomposed the split with the PFLP that originated with the “phased strategy” of 1974⁵, and it had overall produced better relations with the other members of the Rejectionist Front⁶. But, on the other hand, the isolation of Egypt ended the possibility envisioned by ‘Arafāt and other Faṭḥ moderates of joining the peace process in Geneva, and severely restricted chances of dialogue with the US. Furthermore, the newfound unity of Iraq, Syria and Libya led to a renewed attempt at imposing Arab tutelage on the PLO through the activism of the radical leftist factions both in the PLO and Faṭḥ itself⁷.

The PLO leadership aimed to reinforce its organisation’s autonomy: on the diplomatic side, it used the moment of Arab unity to strengthen its dialogue with Jordan, which it had already restarted in the previous years, after the halt caused by the events of Black September in 1970. The objective was to ensure the participation of the PLO in any future negotiations on the fate of the oPT, if necessary, in a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation⁸.

On the ground, it started to actively transform its presence in Lebanon, accelerating the creation of bureaucratized structures, both in the social and military fields, sustained by the new influx of funds pledged by rich Arab states. This markedly statist turn of ‘Arafāt was meant to present the PLO as a quasi-state, even a state-in-exile, with the aim of both defending it from Arab interference and presenting it as a credible partner for negotiations with Western states⁹.

The choice to establish the territorial base of the new PLO “state” in Lebanon was rather obvious: it was the only state bordering Israel with a substantial Palestinian population in

³ “Overall Chronology”, 1978.

⁴ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 445-46.

⁵ Francesco Saverio Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline: Loyal Opposition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 23.

⁶ The Rejectionist Front was a coalition of factions that opposed the conclusions of the 12th PNC of 1974. It was composed of the PFLP, the ALF, the PPSF and the PFLP-GC.

⁷ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 424-25, 434, 445.

⁸ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 438.

⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 447-48.

which the PLO had almost total freedom of action regarding armed groups and the control of the refugee camps, thanks to the Cairo Agreement of 1969 with the Lebanese government. Furthermore, the Palestinian refugee population was largely excluded from the political Lebanese life, not to upset the delicate confessional balance of post-independence Lebanon: this made it easier for the Palestinian factions to create parallel structures of government, and for the Palestinians to construct a separate and distinct national identity¹⁰.

Having said this, the situation in Lebanon was not easy: the presence of the Palestinians *fidā'iyyūn* and their alliance with the progressive forces of Lebanese politics soon emerged as one of the main causes of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, in which the PLO factions were dragged due to their alliance with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM)¹¹. Furthermore, in 1976, Syria invaded the country, occupying the north-eastern part of Lebanon, in an effort to reassert its influence. Similarly, in 1978, Israeli forces invaded the south, a staging area for attacks into northern Israel, retreating after the establishment of a buffer zone patrolled by UN peacekeepers and Lebanese proxy, the Southern Lebanon Army (SLA).

The process of creation of para-statal apparatuses in the refugee camps and the presence of so many foreign actors in Lebanon soon transformed the country into the main arena of the political, but also armed, confrontation between Syria, Iraq, Faḥ and the PLO opposition. The latter confrontation was also driven by the important growth of the PLO factions' arsenal, both in terms of quantity and quality¹². The majority of clashes saw Faḥ opposing the pro-Syrian (aṣ-Ṣā'iqa, PFLP-GC), pro-Iraqi (PLF, ALF) and the other members of the Rejectionist Front¹³, while in the background, the Civil War continued to oppose the forces of the PLO-LNM to the Phalangists and the traditional Lebanese elites, while tensions in the south continued to erupt into PLO clashes with the Shiites, represented by 'Amal, the Israeli-backed SLA and UNIFIL¹⁴.

The challenge on the ground was soon matched by a more institutional one: in view of the 14th PNC to be held in Damascus in January 1979, a broad coalition of all the leftist factions of the PLO, supported by Iraq, Syria and leftist members of Faḥ, launched a challenge to 'Arafāt and its leadership. The aim was to abandon the moderate behaviour towards negotiations and to obtain a more collective leadership, restricting the power of the Chairman¹⁵. But the call for Palestinian independence from Arab interference was enough

¹⁰ Rex Brynen, "PLO Policy in Lebanon: Legacies and Lessons", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter, 1989): 51,53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2537633>.

¹¹ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2012), 208-10.

¹² Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 449.

¹³ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 433-36.

¹⁴ Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 219.

¹⁵ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 442-45.

to disarm the critiques of the opposition, seen after the fighting in Lebanon as too aligned with Damascus and Baghdad: 'Arafāt and Fath saw their leading role confirmed, together with previous PNC resolutions¹⁶.

The beginning of the '80s saw a renewed diplomatic offensive by the PLO, thanks to the conclusions reached at the 14th PNC: 'Arafāt visited EC countries, which in 1980 signed the Venice Declaration recognising the Palestinian right to self-determination. Furthermore, the chairman tried to restart a dialogue with the US, using his role in an effort to mediate a solution to the hostage crisis between Washington and Tehran¹⁷. In addition to the activities of the PLO leadership, Saudi Arabia announced in 1981 its *Fahd Plan*, later adopted by the Arab League in 1982 under the name of the *Fez Initiative*, which envisioned an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital within the 1967 border, Palestinian right of return and the dismantlement of Israeli settlements¹⁸.

Although the diplomatic situation seemed favourable for 'Arafāt's initiatives, on the ground, the PLO Left was determined to reach its objective, namely, sabotaging the diplomatic efforts of the moderate leadership. To do this, it aimed at dragging the PLO in constant confrontations with Israel and its Lebanese proxy, the SLA: it was helped in this by Syria, who provided intelligence to the guerrillas in the south, but also from the other Arab republics, especially Libya, that supplied them with important shipments of armaments, particularly of various kinds of artillery with which to target Israeli territory¹⁹. The advantages of this for the PLO opposition were twofold: on the international scenario, it undermined the reputation 'Arafāt was trying to build for himself as a moderate, respectable partner for negotiations, while in the Palestinian arena, it deprived him and Fath of their legitimacy as the staunchest opponents of Israel.

Another threat to 'Arafāt came in 1980 from within its own party, Fath: the leftist faction, emboldened by its allies' success, pushed and obtained the convocation of the fourth General Congress in May 1980. Although 'Arafāt managed to maintain, and actually increase, his hold on the party, Fath's Left was able to influence the rhetoric of the party, but more importantly, showed its ability to organise and constrain the strategies of the Chairman²⁰.

Therefore, at the end of 1980, the PLO seemed to have reached another point of balance, similar to the pre-Camp David situation: 'Arafāt and the leadership of the PLO and Fath trying to exploit diplomatic openings to start negotiations based on a Palestinian state

¹⁶ "Palestine National Council, 14th Session: National Unity Programme", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/16286/palestine-national-council-14th-session-national-unity-programme>.

¹⁷ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 485, 501-2.

¹⁸ "Crown Prince Fahd Peace Plan", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/9654/crown-prince-fahd-peace-plan>.

¹⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 486, 495.

²⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 493.

within the 1967 borders, while the PLO Left opposed these plans, claiming the whole of Historic Palestine. On the Arab arena, the PLO was still able to balance Iraqi, Syrian and Jordanian influences, while it had firmly established in west Beirut and in the south until the Litani: although localised clashes between the various actors of the Civil War still happened, the truce guarded by UNIFIL between the PLO and Israel overall held, with cross-border raid greatly reduced from the pre-'78 period.

This illusion was broken by a rapid series of events that started in 1981, culminating in the Israeli invasion of 1982: on the international arena, the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the USA in 1981 meant that the weak dialogue started between the PLO and the US experienced a sudden termination²¹. Dialogue with the European states was equally unfruitful, with the Venice Declaration failing to influence the behaviour of Israel or the USA. Furthermore, in September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, hoping to exploit the post-revolution readjustment: as the war persisted (it would for eight years), Arab attention, especially by the Gulf states, was focused on it, rather than on Palestine and the PLO²². This also meant that 'Arafāt lost Iraq as a counterbalance to Syria, which was now able to exert all its influence in Lebanon to oppose the PLO leadership. The failure of the diplomatic initiatives of 'Arafāt did not stop the PLO Left from harshly critiquing him for even attempting a dialogue with the US, with the support of Ḥafīz al-'Asad, who saw as dangerous any attempt by the PLO to have an autonomous diplomatic strategy²³.

But it was Lebanon, the epicentre of the problems for 'Arafāt: Palestinian militias were increasingly accused by Lebanese civilians of being the cause of the Israeli attacks that hit them, especially in the south and Beirut. In addition to this, the militias were also discredited by the violent and criminal behaviour of some of their members (*tajāwuzāt*, "excesses" in Arabic), and by the continuous internal fighting that often resulted in civilian casualties²⁴. These problems, already present before 1981, worsened with the return of heavy fighting in that year: the round of violence started when, in December 1980, the Lebanese Forces, a Christian Maronite militia, attacked, supported by Israel, the Syrian-held city of Zaḥla. The fighting lasted six months and saw the direct intervention of Israeli air and artillery strikes, but ultimately, in June '81, the city remained in Syrian hands thanks to the mediation of the US. Israel, disappointed by the failure in Zaḥla, decided to directly target the PLO bases in the south: July saw a constant exchange, dotted by tenuous cease-fires, of Israeli airstrikes, even reaching the PLO headquarters in Beirut, and Palestinian artillery fire. It was only on the 24th of July that the US were able to broker a

²¹ Steven L. Spiegel, "The United States, 1948-1993", in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 303.

²² Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States* (Routledge, 2009), 71.

²³ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 501-2.

²⁴ Brynen, "PLO Policy in Lebanon", 62.

more lasting truce, which maintained the situation virtually unchanged²⁵.

Israel was once again dissatisfied with the result of its military actions in Lebanon, having been unable to dislodge either the Syrians or the Palestinians from the strategic areas close to its northern border. Furthermore, the announcement of the *Fahd Plan* signalled a possible diplomatic opening for the PLO that Tel Aviv was determined to deny: it was probably around this time that the decision to invade Lebanon to expel the Palestinian militias was taken²⁶.

Israeli intentions were soon understood by the PLO: 'Arafāt and Khalīl al-Wazīr, the leader of Fath's military wing, began in the second half of 1981 a program of military preparations in view of the ever-increasing possibility of an Israeli invasion, aimed not only at the south but even at Beirut. They hoped that, as in July, a massive Palestinian artillery force that could cause serious damage in the north of Israel would act as a deterrence against any Israeli offensive action. The other factions of the PLO acted in an ambivalent manner: in the south, they joined Fath in its defensive works, even establishing local joint commands and force coordination, but in Beirut, daily clashes still occurred between the different groups, especially between the pro-Syrian ones and Fath. In addition to this, the Palestinian Left reacted vigorously in opposition to the Fahd Plan, forcing 'Arafāt to retract his approval of it, causing Saudi displeasure with him²⁷.

Furthermore, the PLO leadership tried to ensure the neutrality of the other actors of the Lebanese arena, both the remnants of the Lebanese state and the Christian and Shiite militias not openly aligned with Israel. The initiative was largely ineffective, and the security situation in Beirut saw a drastic deterioration, with gunfights and bomb attacks organised by Lebanese secret services, the Phalangists and 'Amal, targeting even Western ambassadors. The attempt at building a dialogue with the Maronites and the Shiites also angered the LNM, which started to openly voice its discontent with the policies of the PLO, joining the already critical Sunni and Shiite elites. This not only caused an additional deterioration of the status of the PLO in the Lebanese public opinion, but also hampered military preparations, which were disrupted by sabotage, diversion of forces to prevent attacks and non-collaboration by other Lebanese militias, even allied ones²⁸.

The rest of '81 and the first half of '82 were spent by the PLO furthering defensive preparations and operative plans and avoiding to respond to any Israeli provocation, both in the oPT and in Lebanon: the most serious one was in April and May 1982, when in response to the death of an Israeli soldier caused by a landmine, the IDF launched a campaign of airstrikes, the first prolonged one since the 1981 cease-fire. The campaign saw limited PLO artillery counter-strikes, while much more intense was the mobilisation inside

²⁵ Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 216-17, 219.

²⁶ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 507-8.

²⁷ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 508-18.

²⁸ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 512-21.

Israel, where northern communities protested with the Knesset and asked to respect the cease-fire²⁹. But the decision to launch an invasion was already taken in Tel Aviv, to the point that operative plans with a wide range of objectives were already prepared: in May, Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon flew to Washington to meet with Alexander Haig, US Secretary of State, and received his approval for an operation in Lebanon to remove PLO military infrastructure from the country³⁰.

The *casus belli* was the attempted murder of the Israeli ambassador in London on the 3rd of June 1982: the fact that the attack was soon attributed to the 'Abū Niḍāl Organization, a splinter group of Fath outside the PLO and on which 'Arafāt had no control, did not stop the Israeli government from blaming the PLO and accusing it of violating the 1981 cease-fire in southern Lebanon. Opening airstrikes were carried out by the Israeli Air Force already on the 4th and 5th, while the first IDF ground troops crossed the Lebanese-Israeli border on the 6th³¹. At the start of the operations, Israel declared that it aimed at creating a forty km-wide security belt free of Palestinian armed groups, but with the passing days and the increasing IDF military advance, it became clear that the objective was to arrive in Beirut and strike the PLO headquarters in the western part of the city. The reason for this was that the true objective of the invasion was not to protect the communities of northern Israel, but rather to expel the PLO from Lebanon, dismantling its quasi-statal organisation in the country, and consequently denying it the ability to chart an autonomous strategy both diplomatically and in the Territories³².

The invading force was opposed by the whole of the PLO armed factions and by the Syrian troops in Lebanon: the former were concentrated in the coastal and central regions, while the latter were stationed mainly in the Biqā' Valley in the east. The fight in the Biqā' was intense in the first days, but after heavy Syrian losses, the two armies negotiated a truce on the 10th, after which the fighting in the Valley and with the Syrians ceased. This left the IDF free to concentrate on the Palestinian forces in the centre and the coast, racing towards Beirut: in these regions, cease-fires mediated by the US between Israel and the PLO were routinely broken by further IDF attacks. After weeks of fighting, Israeli troops were able to surround the capital on the 20th, while on the 26th they were able to expel the last Syrian and Palestinian troops and link with Phalangist militias in the mountain region around the city, completely blockading it: 'Arafāt, together with the other PLO factions, decided to resist in the western half of the city to negotiate the best conditions for an evacuation³³.

Negotiations had already started on the 13th, when Israel demanded that the PLO disarm and evacuate through the Biqā' Valley: all the Lebanese actors, even the LNM, pressured

²⁹ "Overall Chronology", 1982.

³⁰ "Overall Chronology", 1982.

³¹ "Overall Chronology", 1982.

³² Brynen, "PLO Policy in Lebanon", 59-60.

³³ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 523-30.

‘Arafāt to accept, although he ultimately refused, even though the idea of the evacuation was accepted by every Palestinian faction in Lebanon. This idea was accepted since the deterrence in the south had failed to materialise, and the PLO now faced an overwhelming invasion force, both in numbers and equipment, having, at the same time, lost all the support of the Lebanese people, although a significant number of LNM fighters still joined Palestinian militias against the IDF, the SLA and the Phalangists³⁴.

The following two months consisted of a mix of fighting, with the Israeli forces launching air and ground attacks against Palestinian positions in west Beirut, which held remarkably well, and diplomatic contacts to organise an evacuation plan between the PLO, the US, Arab and Western states and Israel³⁵. The agreement was reached on the 20th of August: all PLO personnel and its leadership had to leave Beirut to pre-arranged destinations, with safeguards for remaining Palestinians were established. PLO fighters were allowed to keep light weapons, while the heavy ones were to be ceded to the Lebanese Armed Forces (although the PLO gifted many of these weapons to the LNM). This process was to be guarded by an *ad-hoc* Multi-National Force (MNF), composed of troops from the US, France and Italy, and a country-wide cease-fire was implemented between all foreign and local forces³⁶.

The evacuation plan was implemented without major problems, with PLO personnel directed to Jordan, Iraq, Syria, North and South Yemen, Sudan, Algeria and Tunisia, with the latter chosen to host the PLO headquarters in its capital. The same could not be said about the truce: the MNF was hurriedly withdrawn on the 14th of September, followed the day after by the occupation of the city by the IDF. From the 15th to the 29th the Israeli forces conducted raids into former Palestinian offices, while between the 16th and 18th they offered logistical support and assisted without intervening to the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the Ṣabrā and Shātīlā refugee camps by the Lebanese Forces: it was this event and the strong international reaction it caused that prompted the withdrawal of Israeli forces and the return of the MNF to the city³⁷.

The Territories to the fore

The loss of its territorial base in Lebanon was a heavy blow for the PLO, but it also had some positive aspects: notwithstanding the uncertainty of the first days, Palestinian fighters were able to resist a vastly superior enemy long enough to reach an agreement that still allowed the preservation of their political and military apparatuses. Palestinian resistance improved the morale of Palestinians and Arabs everywhere, and the PLO

³⁴ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 529-30.

³⁵ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 533-37.

³⁶ “Plan for the Departure from Lebanon of the PLO Leadership, Offices, and Combatants in Beirut”, Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historic/text/9658/plan-departure-lebanon-plo-leadership-offices-and-combatants-beirut>.

³⁷ Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 224-25.

factions were unanimous in their positive evaluation of the political strategy of both the Chairman and the Organisation, while still maintaining some freedom of action concerning their planning for the future. But it was exactly in this aspect that the usual divisions among the Left and the leadership started to appear again: while the former pushed for political autonomy and the continuation of the struggle, the latter started to consider the diplomatic possibilities that the new situation offered³⁸.

But, before analysing the next period of Palestinian history, it is necessary to rapidly overview the situation in the occupied Palestinian Territories, which started to experience significant changes originating from the 1967 occupation, but that only in this period of time started to manifest themselves.

The first was the growing influence of the PLO in the Territories: the two municipal elections of '72 and '76 can be a good indicator of this. While the first were dominated by traditional rural and urban elites, the second were largely won by leftist and nationalist candidates tied to the PLO³⁹. This shift was caused by several factors, first of all the decline in power of those traditional elites, often tied to Jordan, caused by the social and economic change in Gaza and the West Bank: university education, remittances by Palestinians in the oil-rich Gulf states and the spread of wage labour in the Israeli industry created a new middle and working class oriented towards a distinct Palestinian nationalist project, especially in the West Bank⁴⁰.

Notwithstanding these changes, until 1978, militancy in the Territories was mainly directed to armed struggle, rather than to popular mobilisation: the proposed Camp David autonomy plan changed this attitude. Fearful of being excluded from the possible institutions that the plan would create, the three PLO groups present in the Territories, Fath, the DFLP, and the PFLP started to organise trade unions and popular associations (women, students, youth), following the example set by the Communists⁴¹ in the previous years. This also caused strong competition between the four groups active in the oPT (the three mentioned above plus the Communists) for the control of the new mass organisations, often following the splits and clashes at the PLO central level⁴².

Notwithstanding these disputes, it can be said that the whole of the PLO had substantially accepted the idea of expanding to the oPT the statist approach it was employing in Lebanon. The difficulties of this were that by doing so, it entered into conflict with the other

³⁸ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 540-43.

³⁹ Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "Elections in Occupied Palestine: Control, Resistance, and Contention", in *The Handbook of Elections in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Francesco Cavatorta and Valeria Resta (Routledge 2023), 252-53.

⁴⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 466-70.

⁴¹ The Palestinian Communist Party was founded only in 1982, joining the PLO in '87, but communist political militancy had a long-standing presence in the Territories, incarnated in the '60s and '70s by the West Bank branch of the Jordanian Communist Party.

⁴² Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 474-78.

two statist centres present in the Territories, namely Israel and Jordan. While the first held more direct control and more powerful economic leverage, a union of some form between Jordan and the oPT was still a popular solution to the Palestinian Question (the so-called “Jordanian option”), as it could be seen by the joint Palestinian-Jordanian committee established after the 1978 Arab League summit for the administration of the funds directed to the Territories⁴³. The PLO response was to intensify both its armed and political struggle, which caused a harsh reaction by the Israeli government, which, in June 1981, launched an “iron fist” policy towards Palestinian activism, and established a civil administration for the Territories later that year in preparation for the Camp David plan⁴⁴.

With the fall of Beirut and the expulsion from Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories would become the main arena for Palestinian political activity, as we will see in the next paragraph.

2. From 1982 to 1987: exile and splits

The unity of the PLO factions after the evacuation from the Lebanese capital was soon to disintegrate, in what would be one of the most difficult periods in the history of the Palestinian resistance movement. The root causes of the disputes between the Left and the Chairman, namely the research of a diplomatic solution confined to the oPT for the latter and the opposition to this of the former, were not eased by the transfer to Tunis, but rather amplified by it. As a matter of fact, in the five years after 1982, the PLO would see splits, both in its institutions and in the Territories, armed clashes in Lebanon, repression by Israel and attempts at capture by Arab states, especially Syria. Both the PLO statist project, having lost Lebanon and facing increasing repression in the Territories, and its diplomatic effort were severely hit in this period.

The first indication of the weakening of the Palestinian diplomatic position came already in 1982, even before the evacuation from Beirut was completed: on the 1st of September, Reagan announced his plan for an autonomous Palestinian entity in the Territories. The plan was less advanced than the 1981 Fahd Plan, since although it ruled out Israeli annexation, it did the same with Palestinian statehood, only contemplating autonomy in association with Jordan. The opposition to the Reagan Plan of the Palestinian Left was irrelevant, since Israel rejected the Plan even before the PLO could consider it, and it consequently disappeared after the events of September in Lebanon⁴⁵.

⁴³ “Overall Chronology”, 1978.

⁴⁴ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 519.

⁴⁵ Laura Zittrain Eisenberg, “The Israeli-Palestinian peace process, 1967-1993”, in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 88.

In response to this increasingly difficult diplomatic position, 'Arafāt chose to revive his dialogue with Jordan: in October 1982, the Chairman and King Ḥusayn met in Amman and agreed to the idea of a Palestinian-Jordan confederation and on the creation of a joint committee tasked with the preparation of a common diplomatic strategy⁴⁶.

The reaction to this agreement exemplifies the division that would characterise the Palestinian resistance movement in the following years: the moderates, composed mainly by 'Arafāt and Fath's (which increasingly corresponded with the PLO's) leadership, and a majority of the party, opposed to the Rejectionists, composed of the left of both Fath and the PLO, but also dissident groups outside of it tied mainly to Syria. While the former insisted on a diplomatic path to be achieved through dialogue with the US, but also with Jordan and even Egypt, the latter insisted on the necessity of armed struggle and the rejection of negotiations, instead focusing on the relations with republican Arab states (mainly Syria, Iraq and Libya) and the USSR. One of the reasons for this division was that while 'Arafāt and his party enjoyed great popular support in the Territories, the leftist and smaller factions did not, having to rely much more on armed struggle for legitimacy⁴⁷.

The last instance in which the PLO was able to maintain a semblance of unity was the 16th PNC of February 1983: the final statement employed to usual ambiguity that allowed the opposition to stress the necessity of armed struggle, together with leaving enough freedom of action to 'Arafāt to develop its diplomatic strategy. The 16th was also the last PNC in which the decisions were taken through consensus: the future would see the growing importance of coalition building and majority rule, as 'Arafāt grew and centralised its power and decision-making, and the opposition tried to gather enough forces to contain him⁴⁸.

As a matter of fact, resentment towards the Chairman started to mount even before the PNC, but grew exponentially after it: this was caused by its continued dialogue with Jordan, and its overtures to Egypt, the Fahd and Reagan Plans. Furthermore, news was starting to circulate about the Ṣabrā and Shātīlā massacre and the general violence to which Palestinians in Lebanon were subjected, casting doubts on the security guarantees offered to them in the 1982 evacuation plan⁴⁹.

Divisions and new alliances soon started to emerge in reaction to this: in June '83, the PFLP and the DFLP announced the creation of a Joint Political and Military Command, with the objective of strengthening the PLO collective leadership and, secondly, to lead to a reunification of the two Marxist-Leninist factions⁵⁰. But the most serious threat to 'Arafāt did not come from outside, but from Fath itself: in May, Sa'īd Murāgha led a split from the

⁴⁶ "Overall Chronology", 1982.

⁴⁷ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 31-33.

⁴⁸ Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "Coalition Politics and Regional Steadfastness: The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine between 1983 and 1984", *Annali di Ca' Foscari Serie Orientale* 50 (Dicembre, 2014): 83, <https://dx.doi.org/10.14277/2385-3042/5p>.

⁴⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 559.

⁵⁰ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 38-39.

party, accusing the leadership of surrendering to the US and Israel, and wanting to liquidate Palestinian armed struggle. Dissidents reorganised into the new Fath al-Intifāda and started issuing demands to mainstream Fath aimed at unravelling 'Arafāt's diplomatic strategy and even the evacuation from Lebanon: negotiations soon reached an impasse and quickly devolved into military clashes. Al-'Asad declared its support for the dissidents, and in June, these started to attack, with Syrian support, the positions of Palestinian groups still loyal to 'Arafāt, expelling them from the Biqā' Valley, while Syria declared 'Arafāt and al-Wazīr *persona non grata* and expelled the latter from Damascus. Contrary to the expectations of Syria and Murāgha, the Joint DFLP-PFLP Command did not align with the dissidents, but rather preferred to declare neutrality and offered to mediate between the parties, since both Fronts valued most PLO unity and autonomy from external interference⁵¹.

The events between the summer of '83 and the summer of '84 delineated the three main groups into which the Palestinian movement would divide itself in the years to come: the first was Fath, which, after the separation of its more radical wing, saw 'Arafāt markedly increasing its control over it. The second, was composed of the two Fronts, the Palestinian Communist Party and the Palestinian Liberation Front, reunited under the name of Democratic Alliance (DA): this was a sort of loyal opposition, still struggling for a more collective leadership of the PLO, in favour of a dialogue with the dissidents and Syria but still valuing PLO unity, while being opposed to dialogue with Egypt, Jordan and the US. Finally, the Rejectionists included factions both in and out of the PLO, such as Fath al-Intifāda, aṣ-Ṣā'iqā, the PFLP-GC and the PPSF, with the addition of two minuscule splits from the PCP and the PLF, who composed the National Alliance (NA). The NA was strongly supported by Syria and Libya and aimed at toppling 'Arafāt, even at the cost of rupturing the PLO, and the rejection of any diplomatic solution⁵².

As said above, the divisions within the PLO institutions were soon followed by development on the ground, especially in Lebanon: the Civil War was already reigniting after the withdrawal of the IDF from the capital, especially in the mountainous region around the city (the so-called Mountain War) between September '83 and February '84⁵³. But the violence would soon directly involve the PLO: since May '83, the Syrians, 'Amal and the Rejectionists had started to expel loyalist PLO personnel from the zones they controlled. The bulk of these fighters soon regrouped in the city of Tripoli, in the north of Lebanon: the Rejectionists and Syria thought that if they were able to defeat the mainstream PLO in the city, they would be able to deal a fatal blow to 'Arafāt's leadership. Therefore, in November 1983, the combined Palestinian-Syrian forces launched an assault

⁵¹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 561-67.

⁵² Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle within, Struggle without: The Transformation of PLO Politics Since 1982", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 65, no. 2 (Spring, 1989): 249-50, 253-54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2622071>.

⁵³ Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 230-31.

to the city, defended by around five thousand loyalist PLO militants, who were joined by 'Arafāt and al-Wazīr: as with the 1982 siege of Beirut, the assailants were unable to dislodge the besieged fighters from their positions, and were furthermore the object of severe criticism by Arab public opinion for unleashing violence upon fellow Palestinians. The fighting ceased on the 24th of November, and negotiations mediated by Saudi Arabia led to another evacuation of PLO personnel. The city saw the last fighters leave on the 20th of December, marking the end of official PLO presence in Lebanon⁵⁴.

Unexpectedly, 'Arafāt's position was strengthened after 1983: his opponents were unable to kill him or depose him, and they had drawn harsh criticism from all sides for their attack on what was still recognised as the only representative of the Palestinian people, at least by Arab eyes. Al-'Asad was indeed able to assert itself as the major power broker in Lebanon, as it would be seen also in March 1984, when he was able to derail a Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement, but, after the 1982 evacuation, the main territorial focus of the PLO had already shifted to the Territories. This reinforced position was shown when, by its own initiative, on the 21st of December 1983, 'Arafāt, on his way from the evacuation of Tripoli, met Egyptian president Ḥusnī Mubārak in Cairo, breaking years of Arab diplomatic boycott⁵⁵. While critics from the Rejectionists were plentiful, but also expected, harsh reactions also came from the DA, especially from its most radical member, the PFLP: the Alliance met in March '84 in Aden and expressed its firm disagreement with the new course of Faḥ and of its Chairman. But soon the "loyal" character of the Alliance showed itself: the following month, a meeting in Algiers opened to the possibility of dialogue with Faḥ in order to convene a new PNC to restore the collective leadership of the PLO and its legality. The dialogue led, in June, to the so-called Aden-Algiers Agreement: the 17th PNC would be convened no later than the 15th of September 1984, and it would have to include the PLO members of the National Alliance, to preserve PLO unity. The PNC would enact some reform aiming to create a more collective decision-making process, but also judge the actions of 'Arafāt and the ongoing dialogue with Jordan⁵⁶.

Negotiations soon started between Faḥ, the Democratic and National Alliance to convene a united PNC, but the intransigence of both 'Arafāt and the NA soon caused a deadlock. As the deadline neared, the DA pushed for a deferment to ensure unity, but the rift was at this point unbridgeable: in November, 'Arafāt took the unilateral step of convening the 17th PNC, outside of the Aden-Algiers framework, and above all in Amman, the first time since 1970. The reaction from the opposition was swift: the PFLP condemned the "personalist" behaviour of the Chairman, and led the DA to boycott the Council, aiming to deprive it of its quorum⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 567-73.

⁵⁵ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 41.

⁵⁶ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 42-45.

⁵⁷ Leopardi, "Coalition Politics and Regional Steadfastness", 92-93.

But this was not enough to stop 'Arafāt, who replaced missing members with ones loyal to him, reaching 257 delegates: the conclusions of the 17th PNC were, as expected, widely favourable to Fath's diplomatic path. The coordination with Jordan was sanctioned and bolstered by the final statement, and even the restart of relations with Egypt was welcomed as a way to strengthen coordination between the two peoples⁵⁸. The Amman PNC marked the definitive end of consensus politics inside the PLO, and the beginning of majority rule by 'Arafāt and the mainstream Fath.

Consequences and reactions rapidly followed: in January 1985, 'Arafāt claimed that Egypt deserved to be readmitted to the Arab fold, while in February, he signed the Amman Agreement with Ḥusayn. The Agreement established a joint Palestinian-Jordan delegation to negotiate with Israel based on UNSC Resolutions, aiming at a Palestinian entity in the Territories to be confederated with Jordan⁵⁹. The Amman Agreement unleashed a storm of critiques on 'Arafāt: the NA openly accused the Chairman of treason, and even the more moderate members of the Democratic Alliance openly opposed the new diplomatic contacts, especially the PFLP and the PLF. These two factions soon started to align more closely to the members of the National Alliance, which was calling for the removal of 'Arafāt: the result was the disbandment of the two Alliances, and the formation of the Palestinian National Salvation Front (PNSF) in March '85 in Damascus, composed by the PFLF, the PLF and the former members of the National Alliance. The two remaining members of the DA, the PCP and the DFLP, were still critical of the new PLO course but remained outside the Front, fearing that if they joined, it would create a parallel, Syria-controlled PLO and deny any chances of negotiations with the Fath's leadership⁶⁰.

The birth of the PNSF interacted with significant development in Lebanon: in April and October 1983, while the PLO and the dissidents were preparing for their final battle in Tripoli, truck bombs hit the US embassy and MNF barracks in Beirut, causing almost four hundred deaths. In reaction to this, the international force would leave the country between February and March 1984, being substituted for security in the capital by the Lebanese army⁶¹. The pause in the fighting was short-lived, since on the 6th of February 1984, an insurrection in the city by LNM-'Amal forces expelled the army from the city, causing its and the Lebanese government's collapse. In addition to this, in mid-'85, Israel had mostly withdrawn all of its forces to a security zone adjacent to the border, and Lebanese factions increasingly saw Syria as the only actor capable of granting stability and putting an end to the, at that point, ten-year-long conflict. In al-'Asad's eyes, the main obstacle to a sectarian division of the country, his preferred solution, was the armed PLO presence in the refugee

⁵⁸ "Overall Chronology", 1984.

⁵⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 578.

⁶⁰ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 49-50.

⁶¹ "Overall Chronology", 1983.

camps, which was quietly being rebuilt by 'Arafāt and al-Wazīr after 1983⁶². For this reason, in May 1985, 'Amal launched an all-out attack against the remaining camps in Lebanon, especially around West Beirut, supported by the more pro-Syrian factions of the PNSF, and with the tacit agreement of other Lebanese factions. The so-called War of the Camps would last until April '87 and would mark the end of any autonomous armed Palestinian presence in Lebanon⁶³.

In the meantime, 1985 also saw the beginning of contacts between the Jordanian-Palestinian diplomacy and the USA, but even this aspect soon ran into trouble. The main question was formal PLO acceptance of UNSC Resolution 242: the US demanded it before any negotiations could be initiated, while 'Arafāt was unmovable in its opposition to any precondition. Furthermore, a series of attacks by smaller Palestinian factions, most notably the Achille Lauro hijacking by the PLF in October 1985, put further strain on the PLO-USA dialogue, notwithstanding the declaration made by 'Arafāt in Cairo in November in which he disavowed any armed attack outside the oPT⁶⁴.

The stubborn refusal of 'Arafāt to accept the Resolution and the consequent lack of progress in the dialogue with the US resulted in the end of cooperation with Jordan: in February 1986, the King announced the end of diplomatic coordination with the PLO, the suspension of the Amman Agreement and the renewed interest of Jordan in the Territories, signalled by a five-year development plan⁶⁵.

After this event, the PLO reached its lowest point: its main diplomatic avenue was now closed, and Jordan now joined Lebanon and Syria in their opposition to 'Arafāt. Furthermore, Israel officially banned any contact with the PLO in August 1986 and started secret talks with Ḥusayn to arrive at a solution based on a multilateral conference to reach peace in the region, and the Jordanian option for what it concerned the Territories⁶⁶.

The PLO severely ran the risk of being excluded by any future solution of the Palestinian Question: 'Arafāt needed to reassert the popular support that he still enjoyed and rally Arab support for the Palestinian cause, of which he still was the most legitimate representative. To do this, he decided to willingly escalate the War of the Camps, ordering all loyal PLO forces in Lebanon to renew attacks on 'Amal, the PNSF and the Lebanese Forces, hoping that the ensuing violence would result in increased support for him and the PLO. In the meantime, the Chairman went on a media offensive, accusing Syria of being the only one responsible for the suffering of Palestinians in Lebanon, and demanding the lifting of the sieges of the camps. The strategy was effective: in September, the DFLP and the PCP

⁶² Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 232-33.

⁶³ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 583, 597.

⁶⁴ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 77-79.

⁶⁵ Avraham Sela, "The PLO at Fifty: A Historical Perspective", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 1, no. 3 (2014): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798914542326>.

⁶⁶ Zittrain Eisenberg, "The Israeli-Palestinian peace process, 1967-1993", 88-89.

announced a reconciliation with Fath, followed by the PFLP in January 1987, since the Amman Agreement, the main cause of the split, was already practically defunct, although 'Arafāt promised to abolish it at the next PNC⁶⁷.

The 18th PNC was convened in Algiers in April 1987 and saw the participation of all Palestinian factions with the exclusion of the PFLP-GC, aṣ-Ṣā'iqa and Fath al-Intifāḍa: the PNC annulled the Amman Agreement, although it left open the possibility of a dialogue with Jordan, based on a Palestinian-Jordan confederation as a possible solution for the oPT. It also stressed the role of the PLO as the only representative of the Palestinian people in any future diplomatic initiative⁶⁸: the message was mostly directed to Israel and the US, since the PNSF could be considered dead, and with it the attempts of Damascus to use it as an alternative PLO.

The 18th PNC can be considered the end of the decline period of the PLO, since it was able to restore a *quantum* of unity, but also because it preceded the beginning of the Intifāḍa in December, the will be analysed in the next paragraph: notwithstanding the repeated challenges to its position, 'Arafāt was able to strengthen its position at the helm of the Palestinian resistance movement. The reason for this success can be found in the above-mentioned trend of statist transformation that began in Lebanon before 1982, but that in this period showed its full effects.

The new bureaucratized civil and military structures needed a constant flow of funds to work, supplied in large part from the aid coming from Arab states, and managed formally by the Palestinian National Fund (PNF) and its director, who occupied a position within the PLO Executive Committee⁶⁹. After 1982, 'Arafāt started to transfer the power it had concentrated in Fath to the PLO: especially after the party's fourth congress in 1980, 'Arafāt was able to use Fath's prominence in the PLO to impose the appointment of men loyal to him at the head of key positions in the new PLO structures, including the PNF (his long-time ally Jawīd al-Ghuṣṣayn was nominated director in 1984), and conversely, to increasingly expand its control from the party to the whole organisation. This also gave way to the development of a patron-client relation between 'Arafāt and the new appointee, which depended on him for obtaining funds: the statist push had transformed into a system of neo-patrimonialism in which the lower echelons of the PLO depended on 'Arafāt for their survival, in exchange for loyalty to him⁷⁰.

This system allowed 'Arafāt an increasing freedom of movement in his decision-making, evident also from the shift from consensus policy to majority rule in the internal politics of the PLO. The successive splits of Rejectionist factions had the only effect of cementing the

⁶⁷ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 589-96.

⁶⁸ "Palestine National Council, 18th Session: Final Statement", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/16299/palestine-national-council-18th-session-final-statement>.

⁶⁹ Sela, "The PLO at Fifty", 290.

⁷⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 603, 605.

Chairman's control over the party's and Organisation's structures⁷¹. This was also due to the unwavering support of the Palestinian people for the Chairman, especially where it counted more, i.e. the Territories: in the middle of the War of the Camps, after the controversial Amman Agreement, he still polled above 70%, in comparison to the 1% of Murāgha⁷².

When the conflict with the Rejectionists shifted to a military one, 'Arafāt used his popularity, sincere or through patronage, the appeal to Palestinian nationalism and autonomy, which drew closer the DA, due to the loyal character of its opposition and its attachment to the concept of PLO unity, to escalate the confrontation with Syria and the Rejectionists. In this way, he was able to reunite a coalition strong enough to defeat the challenge and maintain its position of power⁷³.

A new/old PLO

The united PLO that was reconstituted in mid-'87 had little in common with that of the late '70s and early '80s: 'Arafāt's prominence and its majority meant that the Left had little leverage to influence the strategy of the Chairman. This was much more dependent on external factors, rather than on the internal debate between the factions, where the opposition's objections to the leadership were becoming mostly irrelevant⁷⁴. Nowhere was this more visible than in the diplomatic conduct of the PLO leadership: the idea of a solution including a limited Palestinian entity restricted to the 1967 borders caused in 1974 the first severe split in the PLO, while in the '80s it was accepted by virtually every faction with some following in the Territories. The same could be said about the dialogue and the future relations with Jordan: during the '70s, any contact with Ḥusayn would spell anathema for 'Arafāt, while in the years after '82 he was able to conclude an agreement with him, which failed not due to internal opposition, but because of the Chairman's and the US's stubbornness concerning UNSC Resolutions. These two examples show how the PLO leadership was able to introduce relevant and contentious diplomatic issues into Palestinian internal debate and incrementally reduce opposition to them, in the end presenting them as mainstream⁷⁵.

Another trend of this period was the shift of the PLO territorial struggle towards the Territories, due to the loss of its bases in Lebanon. This would prove fundamental in view of the period of popular mobilisation of the next years, which we will see in the next paragraph.

As it could be expected, the increased interest for political activity in the oPT recreated the

⁷¹ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 41.

⁷² Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 592.

⁷³ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 601-2, 605.

⁷⁴ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 59.

⁷⁵ Sayigh, "Struggle within, Struggle without", 260-62.

divisive dynamics that were unfolding at the central PLO level, only in a diminished and more moderate form, since only Faḥ, the two Fronts and the Communists had a relevant presence in the Territories: the competition was therefore concentrated in the control or creation of the popular mobilisation organisations tied to their respective faction and rivalling each other⁷⁶. Faḥ and the Left could count on two distinct mechanisms for mobilisation: resource distribution by patronage and grassroots movements. Both were used by the two sides, although Faḥ had far greater control on funds reaching the Territories, thanks to both 'Arafāt's control of the PLO and of the joint Palestinian-Jordan committee tasked with the management of funds in the oPT, while the Communists and the Left in general had a longer experience in mass grassroots mobilisation⁷⁷. The result of this process was the creation of fragmented mass organisations tied to their respective PLO factions, which depended on their exiled leadership for funding and political direction⁷⁸. In other words, it can be said that the main statist push that began in Lebanon in 1978 was relocated into the Territories due to the loss of the former. But, as said above, the oPT were already contested by Israel and Jordan, both determined to exclude the PLO from the management of the Territories. The former, following the announcement in 1981 of Sharon's iron fist policy, repressed any PLO-connected activity, starting by dissolving in 1982 the National Guidance Committee (NGC), which was born in response to the Camp David autonomy plan to direct the activities of local Palestinian associations. Until 1987, Israel performed regular campaigns of arrests, administrative detention, demolitions, deportations, bans and closures of Palestinian institutions, especially those around which political activity was most intense, like universities or newspapers⁷⁹. In addition to this, the new Israeli military-civil authorities bolstered the construction of new settlements in the Territories: the Palestinians answered not only by increasing armed attacks against Israeli targets, but also with marches, protests and strikes, which were often harshly repressed by Israeli authorities⁸⁰.

For its part, Jordan tried to tie the Palestinian Territories, especially the West Bank, more tightly to its national institutions: after the NGC was outlawed in 1982, in '84 Jordan reactivated its Parliament, which included representatives from the West Bank. The move was received in the oPT with strong protests, with Palestinians accusing Ḥusayn of trying to undermine the status of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people⁸¹. Jordan's attempts in this sense declined during the period of the Amman Agreement, but

⁷⁶ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 109.

⁷⁷ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 107-8.

⁷⁸ Helena Cobban, "The PLO and The "Intifada"", *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (Spring, 1990): 226, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328099>.

⁷⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 607-13.

⁸⁰ "Overall Chronology", 1982-87.

⁸¹ "Overall Chronology", 1984.

were reactivated after the failure of PLO-Jordan coordination, arriving at an understanding with Israeli authorities, which also produced the London Document⁸².

In conclusion, another challenge to the PLO had started to emerge in the Territories, especially from the Gaza Strip: the Islamist organisations, mainly represented by the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been for a long time tolerated by Israel and Jordan to weaken the PLO, started to shift their activism from social work to political action. This was especially true in the Gaza Strip, where nationalist political activity was less developed, due to the minor degree of economic and social development in the territory. This led to the proliferation of welfare activities by Islamist militants and their consequent popularity. These militants, seeing the success of the Iranian Revolution and Ḥizbullāh in Lebanon, decided between the late '70s and '80s to embrace political and armed activities, with the birth of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ) in 1979, and the more famous Ḥamas in 1987⁸³.

3. The Intifāḍa and the end of the '80s

At the end of 1987, as said above, the PLO had achieved a new stability, although weakened and facing the diplomatic opposition of Israel and the USA. The question was then for 'Arafāt, how to regain his diplomatic leverage: the answer came in the form of a deadly car accident between an IDF military truck and two Palestinian cars at the Erez crossing near Jabāliyā in the Gaza Strip on the morning of the 8th of December 1987.

The event marks the conventional beginning of the six-year-long uprising known as the *First Intifāḍa*: although a period of increased protest was ongoing since 1986, starting from '87, the protest evolved into a full-fledged uprising. The causes for the Intifāḍa were multiple: the decline of the economic situation under occupation, the disinterest of Arab states, who in their November extraordinary summit focused on the Iran-Iraq War and substantially terminated the boycott towards Egypt, while devoting little attention to the Palestinians, and finally the realisation that armed struggle outside the Territories was useless to achieve the end of the occupation, and that Palestinians in the oPT had to mobilise to liberate themselves⁸⁴.

The spontaneous character of the first protests, which started already on the 9th of

⁸² The London Document was the text produced by the negotiations between Israel and Jordan in which they agreed to a multilateral conference and the Jordanian option. Sela, "The PLO at Fifty", 310.

⁸³ Khaled Hroub, "Ḥamas", in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 234-35.

⁸⁴ Rami Nasrallah, "The First and Second Palestinian Intifadas", in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 56-57.

December, was supplanted by a form of organised leadership already in January 1988: the first leaflet, which would soon become one of the symbols of the Intifāda, appeared on the 8th of January, followed by a second on the 13th. These were issued by the National Command for the Escalation of the Uprising, while only on the third leaflet, issued on the 20th, appeared the Unified National Leadership for the Uprising (UNLU). The UNLU would become the decision-making organ of the Intifāda, and was composed of four members, one each for the four main PLO factions active in the Territories: Fath, the PFLP, the DFLP and the PCP⁸⁵.

The formation of the UNLU had two consequences: the first was that the uprising could now count on a clear strategy and organised practices elaborated by the UNLU without having to rely solely on grassroots organisations. Secondly, it allowed the PLO external leadership based in Tunis to exercise a degree of control on the Intifāda and use it as leverage with both the US and Israel⁸⁶.

The practices of the uprising were distinct from previous protests because the UNLU decided to target the social-economic structures which Israel had built in the oPT: this meant economic boycott of Israeli products, shops and activities, strikes, and the withholding of taxes, especially the VAT, due to the occupational authorities. Acts of civil disobedience were also frequent, such as the destruction of Israeli-issued documents, mass resignations of Palestinians from the police or other civil services, and general disregard towards the instructions of Israeli authorities, which often banned demonstrations, enforced curfews and forbade the waving of the Palestinian flag. The Israeli government reacted strongly: in mid-'88, Defence Minister Rabin announced his intention to restore order in the Territories by beating Palestinian protestors. Furthermore, the IDF enforced widespread closures of Palestinian activities and declared Palestinian villages and cities in which demonstrations were particularly intense "closed military zones", essentially besieging them, restricting electricity, telephone and even water and food flows. This led to a flourishing of popular committees, soon directed by the UNLU, tasked with reducing the impacts of Israeli closure by organising underground services, such as schools and hospitals, and street markets, to circumvent closures. They also distributed donations and supplies, obtained through aid or self-taxation⁸⁷.

This great organisational push at the grassroots level could have posed a problem for the PLO leadership in Tunis, namely the emergence of an alternative leadership of the Palestinians in the Territories that could be used by the US and Israel to reach an agreement again excluding the PLO. This was particularly true with the dialogue inaugurated by US State Secretary George Shultz with East Jerusalem intellectuals from

⁸⁵ Cobban, "The PLO and the "Intifada"", 208-9, 211.

⁸⁶ Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "Il movimento nazionale palestinese a Gaza (1987-2023)", in *Il labirinto di Gaza*, ed. Arturo Marzano and Marcella Simoni (Morcelliana, 2024), 43-44.

⁸⁷ Nasrallah, "The First and Second Palestinian *Intifadas*", 57-58.

1988 onwards: the reaction of the PLO was to reassert its role at every level of political activity in the Territories. The Tunis-based leadership was helped in this by several factors: firstly, the great popularity of ‘Arafāt and of the PLO in general and the discredit of alternative attempts, be it the Jordanian option or the Israeli village leagues, discouraged the birth of alternative centres of power, as testified by the intellectuals themselves, who kept insisting that any national negotiations had to be conducted with the PLO. Secondly, organised political activity was monopolised by local PLO factions heavily reliant on the exiled leadership hierarchy, as seen with the creation of the UNLU, in which local leaders were integrated in case of deportation, but at lower levels compared to the diaspora leaders. In addition to this, the absence of smaller rejectionist groups in the Territories denied to their Arab patrons (Syria, Libya and Iraq) the ability to obstruct PLO hegemony in the management of the Intifāda⁸⁸.

Having said this, divergences also emerged between “inside” and “outside”: among the many causes was the disparity between the equal representation of the four “inside” factions in the UNLU and the Territories’ organisations, and the predominance of Faḥ and ‘Arafāt at the PLO level. This caused complaints, mainly from the two Fronts and the Communists, that the leadership in Tunis was changing the texts of the UNLU’s leaflets, or that diaspora leaders were using the uprising to further their political objectives at the expense of the struggle in the oPT. For example, if in 1988 the uprising led the more reluctant factions of the PLO, mainly the PFLP, to accept the idea of a negotiated settlement based on 1967 borders, in ‘89 it forced ‘Arafāt to reject an Israeli plan by Prime Minister Shamir⁸⁹.

But, the most serious challenge to PLO dominance in the Territories came not from its own local militants, but from the rising activism of Islamist factions, especially by the 1987-born Ḥamas. The main rift between the PLO and both Ḥamas and the earlier PIJ was their total rejection of any dialogue with Israel and consequent claim of the armed struggle as the only way to reach the liberation of the whole Historic Palestine. Furthermore, the two Movements accused PLO factions of having abandoned Islam and having accepted decadent Western values⁹⁰.

Notwithstanding these bellicose statements, of which the most clear example is the 1988 Ḥamas charter, the Islamists soon understood that a pragmatic approach would have won greater approval in the oPT, rather than the radical stance of their origins. For this reason, although they declined to enter into the UNLU and maintained separate days for their demonstrations, they informally coordinated with the PLO factions respecting their dates for strikes and mobilisations. At the same time, declarations of Islamist cadres started to emerge in which they did not totally reject dialogue with Israel nor an initial liberation of

⁸⁸ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 218, 221, 225-228.

⁸⁹ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 230, 233.

⁹⁰ Nasrallah, “The First and Second Palestinian *Intifadas*”, 59.

the sole oPT⁹¹.

The success of Ḥamas, and to a lesser degree of the PIJ, was due to the extensive social network of mosques, schools and welfare associations built in the Territories in the previous years: once the decision was made to shift from a passive to an active engagement with Palestinian politics, Islamist could mobilise this social capital and transform it both into activism and consensus. Furthermore, both Movements had the advantage of having their leadership deeply embedded in the Territories: this, together with their radical, religious and social credential and the dedication to the liberation struggle, rapidly ensured a growing consensus in the Palestinian masses, especially, as said above, in the less developed and more religiously conservative Gaza Strip⁹².

But on the international stage, Ḥamas was still little more than unknown, with the efforts of the USA and Israel aimed at containing the spread of the Intifāḍa, and the PLO using it to recover its negotiating position in relation to the former. In early 1988, Shultz proposed a plan to achieve limited autonomy in the oPT based on the Camp David Accords: although the plan was rejected by the PLO, it would represent, in hindsight, the first step of a new phase of dialogue between Tunis and Washington⁹³. Actually, the US would have preferred to continue excluding the PLO from negotiations, but it was forced to do so after Shultz was unable, in his four visits to East Jerusalem, to convince local Palestinian leaders and intellectuals to form an alternative centre of power not tied to the PLO. Furthermore, on the 31st of July 1988, King Ḥusayn declared that he was severing all ties between Jordan and the Territories, in conformity with the wishes of the Arab nations and the PLO, which were expressed in an extraordinary Arab summit in June. This meant not only the disbandment of all Jordanian administrative structures, but also the end of any claim of representativeness of the Palestinians by the Kingdom, or, in other words, the end of the Jordanian option⁹⁴.

After this, ‘Arafāt was actually in a delicate situation: the disbandment of Jordanian structures in the Territories, although positive, since it meant the end of Jordanian attempts at coopting the Palestinians, created a political vacuum that had to be filled by the PLO, or it risked seeing an expansion of Israeli power in the Territories. For this reason, in November 1988, the 19th PNC, reunited in Algiers, also thanks to the pressure from Palestinian militants in the Territories who pushed the PLO to seize the moment, passed the *Palestinian Declaration of Independence*, claiming sovereignty over the whole of the oPT⁹⁵. The PNC was one of the first instance in which ‘Arafāt was able to capitalise on the Intifāḍa to overcome internal opposition: the 19th marked the final transition to majority

⁹¹ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 215-16.

⁹² Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 130.

⁹³ Spiegel, “The United States, 1948-1993”, 304.

⁹⁴ “Overall Chronology”, 1988.

⁹⁵ Sela, “The PLO at Fifty”, 311.

rule, with which the chairman was able to overrule the Left's objections, for example the PFLP's opposition to Resolution 242 and 338, and gain complete freedom of action for its diplomatic programme, including the recognition of Israel, dialogue with the USA, Egypt and Jordan, and the acceptance of all UN Resolutions, including 242 and 338⁹⁶.

'Arafāt immediately resumed his diplomatic offensive: the first task was to convince the US to open a dialogue with the PLO. 'Arafāt ensured this by declaring in December at the UN General Assembly convened in Geneva (the Chairman was not allowed an entry visa into the USA, therefore the General Assembly voted to convene in Switzerland rather than New York) that the PLO would accept Israel's existence, reach a solution based on Resolutions 242 and 338, and renounce terrorism in any form. These were conditions set by Reagan that had to be met before any dialogue with the PLO could be initiated: after Geneva, talks in Tunis with the US ambassadors started a few days later⁹⁷.

The new year saw the development of two processes: on the one side, direct dialogue between Washington and the PLO, also helped by the new Bush Sr. presidency, relatively more favourable to the Palestinians compared to Reagan, and an indirect one between the PLO and Israel, mainly through contact with pro-peace personalities of the two sides. At the same time, the Israeli government intensified its violent response to the uprising, through increased use of fatal shootings, demolitions, arrests and deportations, hoping to contain it and possibly pacifying the Territories: this in turn led to a radicalisation of the Intifāda, with non-violent demonstrations increasingly accompanied by stone-throwing and molotov cocktail attacks. 'Arafāt had to balance these two trends, preserving his newfound diplomatic channels in the face of an ever-more radicalised Palestinian public⁹⁸. In this he was not helped by the new Israeli government headed by right-wing Likud leader Yitzhak Shamir: not considering the fact that he, together with Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin, was the main cause of the increased violence in the oPT, he also insisted that any discussion on the Palestinian Question had to be confronted in a multilateral conference with a Palestinian delegation elected in the Territories. Therefore, the 1989 negotiations were mainly concerned with procedural matters over these elections: in March, Shamir proposed his plan on elections in the oPT, which was rejected in May by the PLO executive committee, although it remained open to the idea of a multilateral conference. The Shamir Plan was then followed in July by an Egyptian proposal, which was met with cautious approval by the PLO, but caused divisions among the Israeli government and failed to become an effective base for negotiations⁹⁹.

With the increasing stalemate in the diplomacy, the violence in the oPT started to have its effects on the "outside" PLO: in August 1989, Fath's fifth congress called for an escalation of

⁹⁶ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 624.

⁹⁷ Cobban, "The PLO and the "Intifada"", 223-24.

⁹⁸ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 121-23.

⁹⁹ "Overall Chronology", 1989.

the armed struggle, while 'Arafāt had, since July, moved closer to Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, who was now free to engage in wider Arab politics after the end of the Iran-Iraq War. To him, the Chairman expressed all his frustration with Israel and the lack of progress in the dialogue with the USA, also praising his ballistic weapons program while receiving funds, weapons and oil¹⁰⁰.

The dialogue never really recovered after the summer of '89: a proposal by Baker, the new US Secretary of State, in October elaborating on previous plans was received with openness by Tunis, but caused a long and intense debate within the Israeli government, which was unable to agree on a response until March 1990, when Labour members resigned due to this lack of response, causing the government's collapse. During this time, the PLO tried to push Washington to shift the negotiations from procedural to substantial matters, receiving mainly negative answers. Matters came to a head in May 1990: on the 30th, the PLF attempted to execute a naval raid on the coast near Tel Aviv, which failed after the Palestinian boats were captured by the Israeli navy. Bush Sr. reacted by demanding punishment against the PLF from 'Arafāt before continuing their dialogue, but after months of violence in the Territories and fruitless negotiations with Washington, PLO militants were strongly opposed to any further concession. 'Arafāt was therefore forced to adopt a tough stance towards the US demands, only stating that the attack was not planned by the PLO, but only by the PLF. This was not enough for Bush Sr., who, on the 20th of June, announced the suspension of talks with the PLO: this, coupled with the fact that, earlier in June, Shamir was able to form a new government composed only of right-wing, nationalist and religious parties, represented a difficult blow for the Chairman's diplomatic strategy¹⁰¹.

But the true blow would arrive in August: on the 2nd, the Iraqi army crossed the border with Kuwait and invaded the country, completely overrunning it by the 4th. Palestinian public opinion was strongly in favour of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, since he had not meddled in the inter-Palestinian violence of the '80s, due to the fact that his attentions were absorbed by its war with Iran, and that he was seen as a radical opponent of both the USA and Israel. The deep feelings of the Palestinian people once again constrained 'Arafāt's freedom of action, making him side with Baghdad: this would have significant and wide-reaching effects on the following years, both concerning the relationship with the USA and the other Arab states, but also on the whole peace process¹⁰².

On the ground, the situation had reached an impasse by the spring of 1989: the Intifāḍa had partially lost its initial impetus and, as said above, saw an increased use of violence by Palestinian demonstrators. This did not mean that the uprising was diminishing in

¹⁰⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 639-40.

¹⁰¹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 640-41.

¹⁰² F. Gregory Gause, "The Gulf War as Arab Civil War", in *The Gulf War of 1991 Reconsidered*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich and Efraim Inbar (Routledge, 2003), 28, 31-32.

intensity, but rather that it lost its expanding character and its capacity to influence the behaviour of international actors. This reduced effectiveness was also due to the increased repression of the Israeli authority, which, although they showed some very weak signs of being open to some dialogue with the Palestinians, were in any case determined to restore order and their control in the Territories: this meant that the original policy of beating protesters was soon replaced by one of deadly shootings¹⁰³.

The increased tensions between the two sides and the ineffectiveness of the dialogue started by 'Arafāt went in favour of Ḥamas, which was able to gain an expanding foothold in Palestinian politics: although its leaders always declined to become an alternative to the PLO, this did not mean that it approved of the conduct of its leadership¹⁰⁴. To the contrary, they aimed at constructing a different Palestinian identity based on religious values, rather than nationalist ones. It was this fundamentally different idea of the Palestinian identity that prevented any inclusion of the Islamists inside the PLO. For example, in April 1990, dialogue between the two failed after Ḥamas requested half of the delegates in the following PNC and equal representation to that of Faḥ in all PLO structures¹⁰⁵.

The uprising between the Territories and Tunis

The Intifāḍa was a moment in which the established mechanism within the PLO could have been changed, acknowledging the experiences and contributions of the local leadership of the Territories: instead, it was the definitive confirmation of 'Arafāt's and Faḥ's dominance in the PLO. The uprising began as a spontaneous movement, surprising the exile leadership, which had just experienced one of its most difficult periods and initially reacted with uncertainty, but soon assumed direction of the demonstrations through the UNLU. The reasons behind this ability of the PLO to coopt the Intifāḍa were numerous: surely, the expansion of statist structures aimed at mobilising Palestinians in the Territory, which started in the previous years, gave the leadership in Tunis an already established network of loyal associations. Although the latter was not responsible for the beginning of the uprising, it allowed the PLO to maintain, during the years, a constant base of supporters and local leaders who rapidly took the lead of the demonstrations and their supporting committees¹⁰⁶.

Furthermore, the rise in the importance of the Territories for the PLO, thanks to the definitive loss of Lebanon and, more importantly, to the Intifāḍa, did not lead to a corresponding rise in the importance of local cadres, not only of Faḥ but also of the PFLP, DFLP and PCP. The exile leadership always maintained tight control over its wings in the oPT: for example, in the later period of the uprising, some parts of the UNLU's leaflets were

¹⁰³ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 638.

¹⁰⁴ Cobban, "The PLO and the "Intifada"", 231.

¹⁰⁵ Sela, "The PLO at Fifty", 314.

¹⁰⁶ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 614.

modified or even literally dictated by Tunis. The deportation of some local leaders from the Territories and their incorporation into PLO exiled hierarchies did not fundamentally change this dynamic, since they were usually awarded low-ranking positions: in the Territories, deportations, and Israeli repression in general, had the effect of pushing local structures into hiding, making coordination more difficult and therefore increasing their dependence on the instructions from Tunis¹⁰⁷.

Finally, but no less importantly, local structures were totally dependent on their exiled counterparts for what it concerned funding, especially after the 1988 Jordanian retreat: Fath was obviously the most clear example of this, thanks to its financial control of the PLO and Jordanian-Palestinian joint committee, but the other factions also exercised this kind of financial control on their own counterparts¹⁰⁸.

This control by the exiled leadership favoured mostly 'Arafāt, who was able to use the Intifāda to further its diplomatic strategy, and at the same time to expand even more its control on the PLO. When the uprising erupted in the Territories, some voices inside the PLO warned against this kind of development: first among them was that of al-Wazīr, who, after the exile from Lebanon, had become the responsible of Fath's Western Sector, which included all the oPT, and the Palestinian side of the joint committee with Jordan. He worried that the Chairman would use the uprising to further his goal, rather than developing the demonstrations to their full potential: al-Wazīr wanted to escalate the struggle in the Territories and even expand it to the Palestinian citizens of Israel, but these plans were never implemented since he was killed in Tunis, in April 1988, by Israeli commandos¹⁰⁹.

Apart from al-Wazīr, 'Arafāt worked hard to undermine any opposition to his power, both in Tunis and in the Territories: in the latter, Fath enjoyed the largest support from Palestinians, while also having a much greater availability of funds, being the first recipient of Arab aid. This allowed 'Arafāt to significantly expand the para-statal structures that the party started to construct in the '80s: these structures were largely dependent on him, especially after the death of al-Wazīr, and his decisions. This replicated the system of neo-patrimonialism and patron-client network, already present at the PLO level, in the oPT, leading to an increase in corruption and fragmentation within and between the various associations and organisations, due to the competition to gain the favour of the Chairman. In Tunis, 'Arafāt's power was indisputable: activities were conducted by numerous committees, all devoid of real power and equally dependent on the leadership, repeating the same scheme of fractionalisation and competition seen in the Territories, both in the PLO and Fath.

An indication of 'Arafāt's growing power was given at the already mentioned Fath's fifth

¹⁰⁷ Cobban, "The PLO and the "Intifada"", 225-227, 230.

¹⁰⁸ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 107-9.

¹⁰⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 618-19.

congress: not only did he determine the composition of both the Central Committee and Revolutionary Council of the party, but he was also elected by acclamation Commander-in-Chief and Chairman of the Central Committee, and most importantly President of the new Palestinian state. Although the latter had just a symbolic meaning, it granted 'Arafāt an added dose of legitimacy and prestige¹¹⁰.

For what it concerns the Left, it was too weak and divided to represent any serious challenge for the increasing centralisation of power by the PLO leadership: while the Rejectionist had lost what little legitimacy they had after the War of the Camps and the beginning of the Intifāda, the DFLP and the PCP had always supported the search for a diplomatic solution, therefore they did not object to 'Arafāt relaunching negotiations with the US and Israel, even if it meant reducing the intensity of the uprising. That left the PFLP as the only opposition to the Chairman's new strategy, but even the Popular Front was drawn closer to him by its strong attachment to the concept of Palestinian unity, represented by the PLO, which was challenged in the late '80s by the growing popularity of Ḥamas. Furthermore, the objective popularity and capabilities of 'Arafāt and its party deterred any faction from openly opposing the leadership and its strategy, leading to the increasing marginalisation of the Palestinian Left¹¹¹.

4. From the Gulf to Oslo

The decision of 'Arafāt to side with Iraq during the latter invasion of Kuwait would have lasting consequences, first among all the drastic estrangement between the Gulf countries and the Chairman: the first signs of strain came in the days immediately following the invasion. On the 3rd and 4th of August, respectively, emergency meetings of the Arab Foreign Ministers and of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference called for the withdrawal of Iraqi troops and an Arab summit for the resolution of the crisis, while rejecting foreign intervention: the PLO abstained from both resolutions. On the 10th, the Arab summit in Cairo condemned Iraqi military actions, vowing not to recognise the annexation of Kuwait, calling again for withdrawal and for the right of self-defence of Gulf states, signalling a shift from a diplomatic to a military stance: this time, the PLO voted against the conclusions of the summit. Kuwait, but also the other Gulf states, saw this as a betrayal, after years of political and financial support to the Palestinian, and 'Arafāt's, cause: the PLO's attempts to amend the behaviour of that first week during the following months

¹¹⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 632-37.

¹¹¹ Francesco Saverio Leopardi, "The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine during the First Intifada: From Opportunity to Marginalization (1987-1990)", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (2017): 273-79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1281574>.

were in vain, also because it failed to ever openly condemn the invasion and it always opposed foreign intervention, even as a consensus was developing around the creation of an international coalition to liberate Kuwait. The lasting impression of Arab and international audiences was that the PLO was supporting Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and its actions¹¹².

This impression was reinforced on the 12th, when Ḥusayn linked his invasion of Kuwait to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, declaring that he would withdraw from Kuwait if Israel did the same from Arab lands. This move, with which the Iraqi leader was hoping to justify his actions under a pan-Arab cover, not only failed to gain any diplomatic traction but reinforced the idea of a “linkage” (as the strategy became known) between Iraq and Palestine. This further improved Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's standing in Palestinian eyes, and at the same time deepened the rift between the PLO leadership and all the other Arab states, to the exception of Jordan, that had deep ties with Iraq and a strong pro-Iraqi public opinion that pushed its leadership to adopt a softer stance towards Baghdad¹¹³.

The new Arab diplomatic scenario was crystallised on the 17th of January 1991: after six months of occupation, the international coalition headed by the USA but including also, among others, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE and Egypt, launched an air campaign against Iraqi targets in Iraq and Kuwait, followed by a five-day ground offensive expelling Baghdad's forces from Kuwait from the 23rd and 28th of February¹¹⁴. The operations of the international coalition signalled the beginning of several trends that would become common in the region during the '90s: with the retrenchment and later fall of the Soviet Union, the United States became the sole global power, marking the beginning of a unipolar moment in international relations. This meant that problems in the region would have to be settled according to the US preferences and frameworks. Furthermore, the open invasion of Arab territory by another Arab state and the consequent support by some Arab states for foreign intervention marked the definitive end of Arab nationalism as a relevant factor in Arab internal and foreign policy¹¹⁵.

The first instance in which this shift manifested was during the Gulf War itself, in the form of a tacit alignment between the Arab states and Israel: while the latter refrained from joining the coalition and even from reacting to the missiles launched by Baghdad towards it, the formers delegitimised Ḥusayn's linkage strategy, painting the war as an internal Arab matter, rather than a result of imperialist policies or connected to the Palestinians'

¹¹² Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 92.

¹¹³ Gause, “The Gulf War as Arab Civil War”, 30-31.

¹¹⁴ “Overall Chronology”, 1991.

¹¹⁵ Ahmed Bahaa El-Din Ibrahim, “A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy: The Madrid Conference (1991), and After” (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2006), 33-34, ProQuest (U239986).

struggle¹¹⁶.

The results of the Gulf War and of this realignment of international and Arab politics were devastating for the PLO, firstly on the financial level: three years of missed incomes due to the Intifāda were now compounded by the disappearance of both the Iraqi aid, that Baghdad redirected towards reconstruction and the heavy international sanctions, and the Gulf one, as a consequence of 'Arafāt's alignment with Baghdad. Furthermore, the four hundred thousand Palestinians who resided and worked in Kuwait were expelled after the latter's liberation, causing the loss of both their remittances and the percentage of the taxes collected from the Palestinians that the Kuwaiti government transferred to the PLO. All these factors resulted in the loss of 80% of funding after 1991, leading to the closure of several offices and departments and the layoff of personnel. But the truly alarming development for the leadership was the marginalisation of the Palestinian struggle at the international and regional stage: with the Intifāda deadlocked, the Arab states concerned with regional security and pleasing the USA, when not openly hostile to the PLO, the latter had lost every gain obtained during the years of the uprising¹¹⁷.

The diminished status of the PLO was accompanied by an increased interest in the region by the USA, who could now wield its newly acquired influence to find a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian Question and the relative Israeli conflict with neighbouring states: President Bush Sr. declared so in a joint session of Congress in March 1991, delineating its objectives and using the absolute victory in the Gulf War to impose the US vision for the region¹¹⁸, stating that "We must do all that we can to close the gap between Israel and the Arab states-and between Israelis and Palestinians. [...] The war with Iraq is over. The quest for solutions to the problem in Lebanon, in the Arab-Israeli dispute, and in the Gulf must go forward with new vigor and determination."¹¹⁹.

The main obstacle to the President's project was Israel: Tel Aviv had the Intifāda mostly under control by the second half of '91, had just seen its most aggressive Arab enemy severely beaten, and had just received several new rounds of economic and military aid from the US and Europe. Therefore, Israel felt no pressure to concede anything to the Palestinians in a moment in which it was at its strongest and the PLO at its weakest. Bush Sr. decided to put pressure on Israel by hitting the new settlements it was building. Starting from 1987, the USSR had decided to relax the restrictions on Jewish emigration towards Israel: this caused, by 1991, the arrival of around four hundred thousand new immigrants to Israel. For this reason, the government launched a campaign of settlement expansion

¹¹⁶ Efraim Karsh, "The Middle East and the Gulf War: A Decade Later", in *The Gulf War of 1991 Reconsidered*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich and Efraim Inbar (Routledge, 2003), 173.

¹¹⁷ Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 94-95.

¹¹⁸ Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 95.

¹¹⁹ "President George Bush Address to Joint Session of Congress on the Middle East", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/23280/president-george-bush-address-joint-session-congress-middle-east>.

for which it asked the US for guarantees on a 10 billion US\$ loan. Bush Sr. asked the US Senate, which agreed, to delay the concession of the guarantees as a way to pressure Shamir where he was most sensitive: support from right-wing voters and the settlers' movement. The move was accompanied by Secretary Baker's shuttle diplomacy, which from March to May 1991 travelled to the region, meeting Israeli, Jordanian, Egyptian, Syrian leaders and representatives of the Palestinians from the Territories¹²⁰.

The result of these meetings was disheartening for the PLO: an international multilateral conference co-sponsored by the US and the USSR would be convened in a neutral state, where bilateral talks between each delegation would be complemented by multilateral committees on different issues, with the two tracks independent from one another. The conference would include Israel, Syria, Lebanon and a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation. Involvement by the USSR, the Europeans and the UN would be minimal, which left the USA as the final arbiter of the conference. The PLO had therefore to renounce not only direct representation but even an independent Palestinian delegation, and, even though the conference was to be based on Resolutions 242 and 338, the activities would be outside the UN system, which deprived the Palestinians of a fundamental equalising factor¹²¹.

But, the PLO had little choice but to succumb to what was basically a slightly revised version of the conference envisioned by the Camp David Accords: the 20th PNC in September 1991 deplored the absence of an autonomous Palestinian delegation, but also recognised the new conditions after the Gulf War, and accepted the US proposal: Faḥ, the PPP (the new name of the PCP) and FIDA, a pro-conference split of the Democratic Front, were able to overcome the objections of the PFLP, the DFLP and of the smaller Rejectionist factions, representing another instance of the opposition's marginalisation¹²².

In October, the USA-USSR invitation was sent to Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians for the opening of a multilateral conference in Madrid on the 30th of the same month. The objective of the bilaterals was to arrive at peace agreements between Israel and the remaining bordering states, while for what it concerned the multilaterals and the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, the aim was to arrive at an interim self-government arrangement for five years, with negotiations on final status issues to begin in the third year. The conference had no power to impose solutions on the parties, and no mention of the land-for-peace principle was made. Letters of assurances were sent to each participant by the US to reassure them on their most pressive matters: Israel's one denied any involvement of the PLO and it stated that the US did not support the creation of a Palestinian state, while the Palestinians' letter, in an exercise of constructive ambiguity, stressed the idea of land-for-peace, the rejection of Israeli annexations and the right of self-

¹²⁰ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 35-44.

¹²¹ Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 95-96.

¹²² Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 142-46.

determination.

The opening session of the Madrid Conference was held from the 30th of October to the 2nd of November 1991, and was followed by ten rounds of negotiations until June 1993¹²³.

The Palestinian delegation was composed of professionals from the West Bank and Gaza, with the exclusion of PLO members and East Jerusalem residents: although the US had insisted, on Israel's behalf, that the delegation could not include any overt member of the PLO, Tunis was able to coordinate and control the works of the delegates, ensuring that no alternative representation of the Palestinians could be built around the delegation: this sometimes caused frictions between Palestinians in Tunis and Madrid, with the former preoccupied on their exclusive role as a representative of the Palestinian people, and the latter focused on the practical conduct of the negotiations. Apart from this small Palestinian victory, the Conference was heavily skewed in favour of Israel: since the two tracks were independent, Tel Aviv could stall the negotiations in the multilateral working groups without fear of compromising the bilaterals, and vice versa. This was helped by the fact that the Arab delegations failed to establish coordination between them, and were set on achieving their objectives, which, due to the power dynamics of the Conference, was easier to do by compromising with Israel and the USA, rather than presenting a single united front¹²⁴.

The bilateral negotiation rounds started on the 3rd of November in Madrid, to then move to Washington for the rest of the Conference, while the multilaterals started in January 1992 in Moscow: progress was minimal in both tracks, at least until mid-'92¹²⁵. The reason for this was the rigidity of both the Palestinian and Israeli sides: Shamir insisted on the exclusion of any Palestinian delegate with PLO ties or from the Diaspora or East Jerusalem, boycotting the working groups on refugees and economic development. The Israeli negotiating strategy was to stall negotiations long enough to force its counterparts to accept facts on the grounds without making concessions, especially territorial ones. On the other side, the PLO instructed the Palestinian delegation to be uncompromising with the Israelis, to the point that no significant progress was made after five rounds of negotiations: rifts persisted not only on the matter and procedures of the interim agreement, but also on fundamental questions like the interpretation of Resolution 242. Through this intransigence, 'Arafāt aimed at sabotaging the Conference to force the US, or Israel, to open direct negotiations with the PLO, bypassing the unfavourable conditions of Madrid¹²⁶.

Things changed in June 1992, when Rabin's Labour party won the election and formed the new Israeli government: although the progress in the bilateral track was not immediately visible, Rabin was generally more open to compromise, for example,

¹²³ "Overall Chronology", 1991.

¹²⁴ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 65-66, 70-82, 95.

¹²⁵ "Overall Chronology", 1991, 1992.

¹²⁶ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 116-18, 214.

resuming Israeli participation in all multilateral working groups¹²⁷. But progress at the Conference was still very slow, lacking results not only in the Jordanian-Palestinian bilateral track, but also in the Syrian and Lebanese one, and in the multilaterals.

It was from this situation of persisting deadlock, that the Israeli decided to open a secret diplomatic channel directly with the PLO: the occasion arose in December 1992, when Yossi Beilin, Israeli deputy foreign minister, and Yair Hirschfeld, a pro-peace activist, contacted in London Norwegian representatives, asking them to organise a meeting with Aḥmad Qurayʿ, the PLO's economic responsible. The Norwegians had already received in the '80s a request by 'Arafāt to help establish contact with the Israeli Labour, and therefore organised the meeting between the three: Qurayʿ wanted to advance the negotiations, expressing preoccupation with the lack of progress in Washington, and asked for the US to be involved in facilitating an agreement with the Israeli, a pillar of 'Arafat's diplomatic strategy. When the Israeli side refused this proposal, the two sides agreed that Norway would act as a mediator, and that Oslo would be the venue in which they would meet and discuss in secrecy¹²⁸.

The Oslo channel represented a lifeline for 'Arafat, who was in late 1992 under pressure from Ḥamas, which was steadily gaining popularity with the lack of progress in Washington, while the PLO was facing another moment of economic crisis. Furthermore, although it had not happened yet, the fact that the delegation had direct access to US and Israeli negotiators alarmed the Chairman, who was always worried about the possible emergence of an alternative representative of the Palestinians that would exclude him and the PLO¹²⁹.

The Oslo negotiations began in January 1993 and were kept secret, not only from the public but also from the vast majority of PLO and Israeli government personnel. In the PLO, the existence of the Oslo channel was known by 'Arafāt, Qurayʿ, Faṭḥ member Maḥmūd 'Abbās, FIDA secretary Yasīr 'Abd Rabbuh, and PPP secretary Bashīr al-Barghūthī. On the Israeli side, other than the people present in Oslo, only Beilin knew, presumably having informed both Shimon Peres and Rabin. The reason for this secrecy was to allow negotiators to broach any subject without pressure from their own public opinion, also improving trust between the two sides in Oslo¹³⁰.

For 'Arafāt, Oslo also had the added benefit of allowing him to directly control the evolution of the meetings, since the PLO had finally achieved a direct channel with Israel, which in January had passed in the Knesset an amendment to its terrorism law allowing for contact

¹²⁷ Spiegel, "The United States, 1948-1993", 305.

¹²⁸ Fride Lia Stensland, "What Role Did Norway Really Play in The Oslo Process?: A Case Study in Small-State Mediation", *Israel Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2023): 34, 36, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2023.380204>.

¹²⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 655-56.

¹³⁰ David J. Wilcox, "A Very Personal Breakthrough: Interpersonal Trust and the Oslo Channel", *Israel Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2023): 19, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2023.380203>.

with Tunis. This also meant that the Chairman had no interest in allowing for any meaningful development in Washington: this was not a risk, considering the conditions in late 1992. In December, Israel had deported more than four hundred Islamist activists into south Lebanon in response to the killing of an Israeli policeman: the deportation caused 'Arafat to declare that the Palestinian delegation would not participate in the ninth negotiation round, scheduled to begin in February. This was followed by the declaration of all other Arab delegations that they would not participate if the Palestinians were not present. Intense mediatory work by the USA allowed for a return to the table in April, but at that point, diplomacy in Oslo was achieving concrete results: in the fourth Norwegian round, on the 30th of April, the two sides agreed not to propose anything in Washington that had not already been discussed in Oslo¹³¹.

Rabin still hoped for a development in the Madrid Conference, where Israel held several diplomatic advantages, but 'Arafat ordered the delegation to be extremely rigid, rejecting bridging proposals from the US: this led the Israeli government to abandon the idea of relaunching the negotiations in Washington and focusing on Oslo, which were in May upgraded to an official status with the arrival of Uri Savir, Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and later other Israeli officials¹³².

Four months of negotiations followed, culminating on the 29th and 30th of August 1993 by the approval by the PLO Executive Committee and the Israeli Prime Minister of the draft of the *Declaration of Principles* (DoP), followed in September by the mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO (9th-10th September) and finally by the signing in Washington on the 13th of September of the Declaration of Principles by Peres and 'Abbās¹³³.

'Arafat chooses Oslo

The years between the Gulf War and the DoP showed both the level of power centralisation 'Arafat had achieved inside the PLO, but also the increasingly unfavourable conditions in which he operated. During the War, 'Arafat launched an additional push to sideline any figure inside the PLO who was not already loyal to him: in the first half of 1991, a series of assassinations and accidents eliminated several high-ranking figures of both Fath and the PLO. The Chairman took this opportunity to reorganise the Organisation's internal structures, especially those concerning security and in the Territories, the latter done to avoid once again the emergence of alternative power bases in the oPT¹³⁴.

The increased power of 'Arafat was met by the irremediable decline of its possible rivals inside the PLO: the Left, split between being in favour (PPP, FIDA) and against (PFPL, DFLP) of the Conference and excluded from the decisions around the increasing neo-

¹³¹ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 121-23.

¹³² Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 124-26.

¹³³ "Overall Chronology", 1993.

¹³⁴ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 654.

patrimonial funds management, lost the little influence it had gained during the years of the Intifāda and the UNLU. This resulted in its inability to influence in any way the decisions of the PLO leadership concerning its diplomatic strategy: for example, in September '92, a ten-group coalition was formed in Damascus, including leftist, Rejectionist and Islamist factions to oppose the Madrid Conference, without having any effect on the negotiations in Washington. But, even more clarifying, was the fact that these factions were not informed by 'Arafāt of the Oslo channel, and discovered it only when the DoP were already agreed upon, after which protests had little effect¹³⁵.

A possible threat to 'Arafāt's power came from the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Conference, and from the members of the PLO that Tunis had dispatched to follow the negotiations and act as a liaison between the leadership and the delegation, and in particular, the most prominent among them, Fayṣal al-Ḥusaynī. They had a much more direct access to Western and Israeli diplomats and therefore could obtain an alternative source of legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians. The answer to this was an absolute control by the PLO leadership over every aspect of the delegation's work: the Madrid delegation was composed of professionals, rather than politicians, following the Israeli and US ban on the direct participation of PLO personnel, therefore they lacked the authority to negotiate on an equal footing with the Israeli delegation, which was composed of state personnel. Therefore, the Palestinian delegation was wholly dependent on the decisions taken in Tunis, relayed to them by al-Ḥusaynī: this significantly constrained their behaviour, making them reticent to take any independent initiative or grant any concession which had not been discussed before with the leadership. This allowed 'Arafāt to maintain control of the negotiations and avoid the creation of an alternative leadership with which the US and Israel could negotiate independently from him¹³⁶.

Notwithstanding this, the PLO leadership was at the beginning of the '90s in an increasingly delicate situation: the Gulf War delivered a severe blow to the PLO's standing, and more importantly finances. It was mainly this that forced 'Arafāt to accept the idea of a multilateral conference, rather than direct talks with the US, that still represented the main objective of its diplomatic strategy. Once there, he instructed the delegation to stall the negotiations, to convince the US that the only way to arrive at a solution was to discuss directly with him: the strategy worked in the first year, also thanks to the intransigence of Shamir's government, but it had its risks. These regarded the most important constituency for 'Arafāt, namely the Palestinians of the Territories: after almost five years of struggle and repression of the Intifāda, they expected results from the exiled leadership. Even the, until then unshakable, popularity of the Chairman was starting to decline, even more worryingly in favour of Ḥamas, and in smaller measure of the PIJ, who adopted a more moderate rhetoric, both concerning Israel and the PLO, but still with an Islamic outlook, being able

¹³⁵ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 144-46.

¹³⁶ Wilcox, "A Very Personal Breakthrough", 17.

to resonate with a greater number of Palestinians¹³⁷.

Therefore, when in '92 Rabin became Prime Minister and adopted a shift in the Israeli strategy, showing amenability to direct contact with the PLO, 'Arafāt had little choice but to seize this opportunity, also considering the new financial crisis that the Organisation was experiencing. Although he had won direct contact, the Oslo negotiations were being conducted in an unfavourable atmosphere for the PLO: the Israelis were not willing to discuss final status issues, remaining attached to the idea of an interim agreement, without any recognition of Palestinian future rights or statehood. The only concession was the formal recognition of the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people, although this had already been recognised by the UN, most European states and the USA. The Israelis knew that 'Arafāt would be compelled to accept, since his popularity was at this point based on his ability to reach an agreement. Therefore, in exchange for recognition of the PLO, they asked, and obtained, the recognition of Israel's right to exist inside the 1967 borders¹³⁸.

When the Oslo channel and the DoP were made public in August '93, 'Arafāt was able to overrule the internal objections to them, coming not from the PLO, but mainly from the delegation, thanks to his popularity in the oPT: the Chairman presented the agreement as a mean to improve the economic condition of the Territories, strained after the years of the Intifāda¹³⁹.

5. Conclusions

The signing of the DoP marked the end of a process whose roots can be found already in the aftermath of the 1978 Camp David Accords, but that intensified after the evacuation from Beirut in 1982. The expulsion of the PLO leadership from Lebanon marked the definitive transformation of the Palestinian struggle from a wider Arab matter to an independent Palestinian national one. In this new configuration, the PLO naturally occupied centre-stage, as the most successful representative of Palestinian interests: this meant that 'Arafāt, the long-standing Chairman of the Organisation, gained renewed importance in the Palestinian resistance movement.

The two trends mentioned above, the construction of bureaucratized para-statal structures in the PLO and the abandonment of the idea of total liberation of Historic Palestine in favour of a negotiated solution based on the oPT, were imagined and propagated mainly

¹³⁷ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 643, 650-51.

¹³⁸ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 120-26.

¹³⁹ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 125, 130, 135.

by the Chairman and his most loyal allies in the leadership.

These two processes reinforced one another: the initial motivation for the construction of a “state-within-a-state”, initially in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon but later directly in the Territories, was the need to build the reputation of the PLO as a credible, and, more importantly, unavoidable partner in future negotiations with the US concerning the fate of the Palestinians. Conversely, diplomatic efforts required ‘Arafāt to be able to control the military and civil structures, to coordinate their activities with the negotiations, reinforcing their transformation into hierarchical para-statal structures.

Since he was already the Chairman of the PLO and the most popular Palestinian leader both in the Diaspora and in the Territories, it is only natural that these trends were directed and benefited greatly ‘Arafāt: the new formal structures responded to, when were not directly overseen by, him, at the expense of other PLO prominent figures not completely aligned with the leadership, which were often relegated to merely ceremonial roles. This was possible thanks to the Chairman’s almost monopolistic control of Arab aid, with which he was able to establish a network of neo-patrimonial client-patron relationships that ensured loyalty to him. The same could be said with the diplomatic strategy, that followed the Chairman’s idea that the only way to achieve a sustainable solution was to seek a direct contact with the USA, instead that with Israel: this was because ‘Arafāt believed that only Washington would be able to put enough pressure on the Israeli establishment to force it to discuss the most sensitive issues of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

The centralisation of power by ‘Arafāt was helped by the fact that the centre of Palestinian political activity after 1982 moved to the Territories, where only a few PLO factions had effective militants: this greatly reduced the influence of its main Arab rivals, Libya and Syria, and their proxy groups in the PLO. This left as the only relevant actors, also thanks to the events of the Intifāda, members of the leftist loyal opposition, who valued PLO unity and the general advancement of the Palestinian nationalist cause more than their own ideological foundations. The shift to the Territories also reduced the importance of organised armed struggle, and the legitimacy derived from it, leaving as a legitimising principle only personal popularity, in which again ‘Arafāt had virtually no rivals.

This allowed the Chairman to set the agenda concerning the questions to tackle in the Palestinian internal debate, moving his ideas, which in some cases were originally minoritarian views, to the centre of attention, often succeeding in making them mainstream Palestinian positions. This was also possible thanks to the gradual shift inside the PLO concerning policy decisions: from the initial consensus principle, PNCs increasingly determined their conclusions with varying majorities and coalitions, allowing ‘Arafāt to mobilise his vast popular support and clientelist network to pass his proposals.

But, if ‘Arafāt had so much control over the PLO and its diplomatic strategy, why was Oslo I so different from not only what he aimed to achieve, but also on what he and the PLO had already achieved in the previous years? What were the factors that led him to start and pursue the Oslo back track when it was so clearly different from what he had envisioned?

The next chapter will try to analyse these factors and choices, having established the historical framework in which the Palestinian actors were moving in 1992-'93.

Chapter II

'Arafāt, the PLO, and the factors behind the negotiations

Having illustrated the trajectory of the Palestinian resistance movement that led to the beginning of negotiations in Madrid in 1991 and Oslo in 1992-'93, we can now highlight what pushed 'Arafāt and the PLO to agree to the start of these negotiations.

Since the factors behind the two choices are connected, but not the same, this chapter will firstly analyse the ones that preceded the opening of the Madrid Conference, and secondly those that ushered in the start of the Oslo channel, also because some of the reasons that convinced 'Arafāt to commit to this dialogue developed from dissatisfaction about the situation in Madrid.

The first part of the chapter will therefore focus on the consequences of the two major events that preceded the Madrid Conference: the Intifāda and the Gulf War. Although the former was able to propel the Palestinian Question to the forefront of international politics, sparking renewed interest in a possible diplomatic solution, the Gulf War severely damaged the reputation and position of the PLO, but most importantly, its finances, forcing it to adhere to the unfavourable conditions of the multilateral Madrid Conference.

These unfavourable conditions, and the deadlock that rapidly developed in both the bilateral and multilateral negotiations, together with frustrating behaviour by other actors, soon reminded 'Arafāt of its belief that only direct negotiations could help in finding a political settlement with Israel.

The second part of the chapter will examine the impact of the developments, or rather the lack thereof, of the talks in Madrid and subsequently in Washington on the PLO leadership and its decision to invest in the opening and continuation of the Oslo channel. As we will see, this was a decision that 'Arafāt took alone with a couple of his colleagues: this choice stemmed not only from the lack of results of the first year of the Conference, but also from his fear that the USA and Israel were aiming at creating an alternative leadership based on the delegations involved in the negotiations.

Furthermore, the lack of results was starting to erode the popularity of the PLO leadership in the Territories, while it favoured the stance of Ḥamas and the PIJ. This led him to finally decide to abandon his idea of searching for a channel with the US administration, in the hope that it would pressure Tel Aviv, and seek direct contacts with the Israelis: this would cause him to initiate and support the talks in Oslo, which would result in the DoP.

Overall, this chapter will show how the two main trends identified in the last chapter (the creation of bureaucratic structures and the Chairman's attachment to diplomacy), and some of their perverse effects, interacted with the events and changes of the early '90s,

leading 'Arafāt and those around him to make choices that would influence the evolution of Palestinian history for the years to come, up until today.

1. The Intifāḍa and the renewal of diplomacy

As stated in the first chapter, the Intifāḍa was a turning point for the PLO, which was, in 1987, still reeling from the splits and confrontations of the early 1980s. The great demonstrations and the mobilisation of a large part of the Palestinian population in the Territories gathered international attention and forced Israel to employ harsh measures to quell the unrest, unsuccessfully, therefore demonstrating the indefensibility of the occupation. Conversely, it created breathing space for the PLO, which was recognised by the great majority of Palestinians as their sole representative, to regain the initiative in the talks towards a political solution.

The decision to utilise the uprising to further what had always been 'Arafāt's intention of obtaining direct contacts with Washington or Tel Aviv was not the only one possible, and it reflects the degree of control and legitimacy that the external PLO leadership had on the political activity in the oPT. Notwithstanding this, other ideas concerning the fate of the Intifāḍa were being discussed inside and outside both of the PLO and the Territories: several members of Palestinian politics, first among others Khalīl al-Wazīr, called for an expansion of the struggle to force the Israelis to withdraw and to involve the Palestinians outside of the Territories, both in the Diaspora and Israel. The Islamist also pushed for the intensification of the struggle, while also proposing a radically different understanding of the Palestinian identity based on religious and militant ideals.

Furthermore, although the primacy of the PLO was never questioned by militants and leaders inside the Territories, it is also true that the years of the uprising bestowed new legitimacy on these latter, which could have resulted in an evolution of the relations between the "inside" and "outside".

The aim of this first paragraph is therefore to understand what led 'Arafāt to assume the direction of the Intifāḍa, controlling both the pace of the demonstration and the initiatives of Palestinians inside the Territories aimed at establishing contacts with Israelis or US officials. Furthermore, we will also see how he was able to utilise the uprising to strengthen its diplomatic initiatives and, above all, the centrality of the PLO, and of himself in it, for what it concerned the search for any political solution regarding the oPT and the Palestinian Question.

The beginning of the Intifāḍa was not immediately perceived by the PLO as the cardinal point that would later be considered to be, since in the years before 1987, several episodes

of increased political activity had erupted, only to then disperse without many results¹. For this reason, Tunis initially reacted with tepid support, not wanting to waste its already limited political capital in an inconclusive flare-up. It was only when the demonstrations kept growing that ‘Arafāt decided to really support the uprising, as it is testified by Sa‘īd ‘Abū Rīsh:

The PLO was stunned by what was happening but remained afraid to commit itself. It did not want to attach itself to what might turn out to be only a flash-in-the-pan affair and end up looking foolish. This is why it took the leadership a month to adopt the intifada. Although he instructed the PLO radios in Baghdad and other places to exhort the local people to greater effort and personally recorded some appeals to that effect, it was Arafat who during the early days of the intifada manifested the most reluctance to provide the rebellion with support because he feared the effects of another failure on his already reduced position [...]. When the intifada would not die and Arafat finally bowed to the inevitable, Abu Jihad (Khalīl al-Wazīr, Ed.) ran after it with remarkable speed.²

As we can see from this first extract, it can be said with a certain degree of certainty that both the event that triggered the first demonstration and the initial protests were spontaneous and outside the control of the PLO. But once the leadership understood the potential of this new wave of militancy in the Territories, it immediately mobilised the structures it had been building in the previous years. Consequently, after the first weeks of disconnect between the “inside” and “outside”, a relationship soon emerged between the local leaders and the PLO in Tunis³.

The control ‘Arafāt exercised on the political associations present in the oPT, together with the unmatched loyalty and the support he enjoyed from the Palestinians in the Territories, rapidly led to the configuration of a hierarchical structure between Tunis and the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). The former gave indications on how to lead and organise the uprising, with the latter detailing the instructions through the leaflets disseminated throughout the West Bank and Gaza, and the protest conducted both by spontaneous groups but also by those same associations tied to the PLO, such as youth or women groups.

Several reasons led the Chairman to decide to enact such a degree of control on the Intifāda: the first was the concern that if left to the initiative and sole control of the local leaders, it would rapidly decline and end without results. ‘Abbās expresses this in his recollection of those years:

“The Intifada, or uprising, erupted on 7 December 1987 to resist the occupation. Basic rules were needed to direct its activities and to prevent it from becoming a stampede or a bubble

¹ Sayigh, “Struggle within, Struggle without”, 263-66.

² Sa‘īd K. Aburish, *Arafat: from Defender to Dictator* (Bloomsbury Pub USA, 1999), 202-3.

³ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 207-8.

that would quickly burst and vanish. Discussion of the political aims of the uprising required a mind uncluttered by sterile slogans or rhetoric, a mind that would deal sensitively with the interests and needs of the people.”⁴

In addition to this, the local leadership itself declined to act autonomously from the direction of the PLO: even leading members such as Fayṣal al-Ḥusaynī or Ḥanān ‘Ashrāwī always recognised the political role of the Organisation as the only interlocutor for any serious dialogue. Illustrating this relation, al-Ḥusaynī himself said: “The field commander here [in the oPT, Ed.] can discuss tactics but not strategy [...] I am inside the Palestinian forest and can see the trees. But only the leaders outside can see where the fire is coming from.”⁵

Another reason was that in 1987, ‘Arafāt, and the whole PLO with him, needed a way to regain the attention of regional and international actors, which, after the expulsion from Beirut in 1982, had gradually sidelined the Palestinian Question, focusing on other crises such as the effects of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. The Intifāḍa revived the issue of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories, while the excessively violent reaction of the Israeli security forces sparked sympathy and support towards the unarmed and often very young Palestinian protestors⁶.

Tunis, therefore, understood that the uprising in the Territories was the only way in which it would be able to leave the international isolation of the ‘80s and regain contacts with the USA and, eventually, Israel. These contacts, in the first months of the Intifāḍa, had to pass through personalities in the oPT, since both Washington and Tel Aviv had banned direct contacts with the PLO. For this reason, the UNLU and the other local leaders became the vehicle through which the first diplomatic contacts were opened between the Palestinians and US officials. Both the “inside” and the “outside” were aware of this dynamic, as testified by Ḥanān ‘Ashrāwī:

“The intifada was carried out by those who lived within the Occupied Territories, but of course we were acting (resisting) not only for ourselves, but also on behalf of those who had been forced to leave Palestine. [...] We (the “inside”) became the umbilical cord of the PLO, at once linking it to the rest of the world, while granting it the legitimacy of a constituency on the land of Palestine.”⁷

In conclusion, the PLO was interested in controlling the Intifāḍa both because it had an interest in not seeing it disappear without achieving anything, in a moment in which the overall Palestinian resistance movement was weak, but also because it offered Tunis a way

⁴ Mahmoud Abbas, *Through Secret Channels: The Road to Oslo: Senior PLO Leader Abu Mazen's Revealing Story of the Negotiations with Israel* (Ithaca Press, 1995), 21.

⁵ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 227.

⁶ Mohamed Heikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations* (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 1996), 382-83.

⁷ Hanan Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace* (Touchstone, 1996), 57-58.

to regain the initiative after it had lost its, until then, main means to fight for Palestinian independence, namely armed struggle⁸.

Having said this, the relation between the oPT and Tunis did not flow only from the latter to the former, but also in the opposite sense: the Intifāda definitely shifted the focus of Palestinian political action from the Diaspora to the Territories, and at the same time caused an evolution of the policies at the level of PLO central organs. Again, the main beneficiary of this change was ‘Arafāt, and to a lesser degree Faḥ: its monopoly on popular support and the loyalty to its party in the Territories allowed him to force the Executive and Central Committee of the PLO to agree to its long-held belief that only a negotiated solution based on the 1967 borders could allow the Palestinians to achieve a step in their fight for national liberation, which was also the widespread belief of Palestinians participating in the uprising⁹.

However, this growth in importance at the PLO level of the Territories and of their political activity was not matched by an increased autonomy or influence in the decision concerning the strategy, and later even the tactics, of the Intifāda. To the contrary, the increase in militant actions throughout the West Bank and Gaza corresponded to an increased control by the central structures of the PLO. The predominance of the latter arrived at a point where the wording of the leaflets was controlled by Tunis¹⁰, while ‘Arafāt could claim that “leaflet No. 75 of the Unified National Leadership of the Intifada was in his pocket.”¹¹

The necessity of such stringent control arose from two distinct, yet connected, sets of concerns by ‘Arafāt and, in general, by the leadership of the PLO. The first was that, although at the beginning the relation between the “inside” and the “outside” was complementary, with the latter giving direction and the former strength, with the continuation of the uprising, the Chairman was worried that the local activists could develop objectives independent from the wider diplomatic strategy conducted by the PLO. Since they had more experience of the needs of the people in the Territories, compared to the exiled leadership, ‘Arafāt feared that a strategy formulated by the local leadership would gather larger consent with the Palestinians in the oPT and diminish his popularity, and consequently damage his diplomatic strategy¹².

Secondly, once local intellectuals from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem began to establish contacts with Israelis and, most importantly, US officials, the Chairman started fearing that, thanks to the greater knowledge of the Territories mentioned above, they could present themselves as an alternative leadership and reach an agreement to the exclusion of

⁸ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 618.

⁹ Ghassan Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process: Consensus and Competition in the Palestinian Negotiation Team* (Routledge, 2010), 43, 48-49.

¹⁰ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 230.

¹¹ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 48.

¹² Aburish, *Arafat*, 208-9.

the PLO. ‘Ashrāwī testifies this, claiming that: “the “outside” often questioned our motives, concerned that we were trying to set up an alternative authority that would ultimately usurp their power.”¹³

The origin of these doubts by ‘Arafāt was the already mentioned emerging disconnect between the situation in the Territories and the strategy and means employed by the leadership in Tunis, which originated in 1987-‘88 and would then mark the whole trajectory of this relationship until 1993. This would then result, on one hand, in the increased control of the mobilisation by the PLO, which we already talked about, but also in the centralisation of any diplomatic initiative by the Chairman, as will be seen later in the paragraph.

Many factors contributed to the distrust of the leadership around what was happening in the oPT: first of all, the fact that the structures in the Territories in which the PLO had invested more were those aimed at guerrilla actions, rather than popular mobilisation. The result was that, although loyal to Tunis, the groups which animated the popular mobilisation of the Intifāda were more tied to local leaders and less attached to the classical conception of armed struggle, were much more creative in their civil disobedience tactics, and therefore less controllable by the exiled PLO¹⁴.

An example of this was the civil disobedience campaign organised in the city of Bayt Sāḥūr: after being targeted by the IDF in mid-‘89, the townspeople organised independent local committees and self-sufficient production of food. The local leadership was an example of collaboration between Christians and Muslims and soon attracted international attention, especially after being put under siege by the Israelis. The interest raised by this locally organised reaction generated mistrust in ‘Arafāt, who declined to offer practical support, resulting in the surrender of Bayt Sāḥūr to Israeli security forces in December 1989 and later in the replacement of its leadership by PLO personnel¹⁵.

Another reason, in the eyes of ‘Arafāt, to mistrust any form of organized action outside the control of the PLO was the birth and expansion of militant Islamist action by Ḥamas and the PIJ, which radically opposed the project of Tunis to utilise the Intifāda to achieve a diplomatic opening, seeing it instead as the beginning of a long struggle to liberate part, and then eventually the whole, of Historic Palestine¹⁶.

Again, this led the PLO to be wary of any other form of alternative organisation, as well as the practices of secular militants, which were often imagined outside the sanctioned PLO structures, and aimed at contrasting the Islamists and surpassing older, unpopular divisions and associations¹⁷.

¹³ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 58.

¹⁴ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 43.

¹⁵ Aburish, *Arafat*, 217-20.

¹⁶ Hroub, “Hamis”, 235-37.

Even a figure above Islamist suspicion such as Ḥanān ‘Ashrāwī (being her a Greek Orthodox Christian and close to the PLO) was attacked when she tried to organize women outside the PLO-aligned General Union of Palestinian Women: “The women’s committees began to encroach on the turf the women’s organizations had reserved as their sole domain, particularly in the areas of political action, social programs, and women’s representation. Trying to set up a Higher Council for Women, we were ferociously attacked by the General Union of Palestinian Women.”¹⁸

But, nowhere was this mistrust and determination to centralise all activities by Tunis more evident than in the field of diplomatic contacts between the Palestinians and the rest of the world. The Intifāda had, in fact, become a catalyst for a renewed wave of diplomatic activity concerning the fate of the Palestinian Territories and the Israeli occupation, proving ‘Arafāt’s intuition correct. The problem for him was that neither the USA nor, even less, Israel had accepted the PLO as a legitimate negotiating partner, insisting instead on talking only with representatives from the oPT¹⁹.

The Intifāda had therefore finally pushed the whole PLO to formally accept the Chairman’s idea of a political solution for a Palestinian entity based only on the 1967 border: in particular, this was sanctioned by the declaration of a Palestinian state at the conclusion of the 19th PNC in Algiers. But this failed to convince Washington to open direct negotiations with Tunis, since the PLO had still not formally met the conditions set by Reagan to open them, among others, the renunciation of armed struggle (terrorism in US terms)²⁰.

Instead, Secretary of State Shultz kept organising meetings in East Jerusalem with delegates of the UNLU and of the intellectuals in the oPT: this, as said above, caused ‘Arafāt to accuse, probably unjustly, the internal leadership of trying to supplant the PLO and create an alternative leadership. To avoid this, but also to force the US to open a dialogue with him, the Chairman pretended that the detailed minutes of the meeting were sent to him in Tunis and that those who were meeting US officials behaved exactly as instructed previously by the PLO.

These instructions were practically limited to refusing any proposal that excluded the PLO from future plans for the Territories: this included the totality of US and Israeli proposals. When these refusals failed to modify US behaviour, Tunis instructed those in the Territories to boycott any meeting with Washington’s envoys, which they duly did²¹. The idea was to pressure Israel, through the Intifāda, and the US, through its frustration with the inability to find a solution that marginalised Tunis, to finally negotiate directly with

¹⁷ Aburish, *Arafat*, 217.

¹⁸ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 60.

¹⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 622.

²⁰ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 21-22.

²¹ Aburish, *Arafat*, 211.

‘Arafāt²².

The first to concede were the United States: in mid-‘88, after the Declaration of Independence, Washington opened a first unofficial channel with the PLO through its embassies in Ankara, Algiers and Tunis, and also through meetings with US Jews hosted by the Swedish. Although these contacts ultimately resulted only in some vague proposal concerning the future of the Territories, they signalled the interest of Washington in contacts with the leadership in Tunis²³.

But the main obstacle still standing in the way of an official PLO-USA dialogue was the US request of formal recognition by ‘Arafāt of Israel’s right to exist, of Resolutions 242 and 338 and the renunciation of armed struggle/terrorism. Although practically all of these conditions were already implicitly accepted by the *Palestinian Declaration of Independence* of 1988, Reagan and Bush Sr. would not yield and requested the leadership to make an official declaration. ‘Arafāt had wanted a dialogue with the US for too long to let this opportunity pass: in a meeting in Tunis, he said to Maḥmūd Darwīsh: “Praise the Prophet, we have always wanted talks with America.”²⁴ –Furthermore, pressures were starting to mount from the Territories in the form of the Islamists, and the Jordanian retreat of summer 1988, which placed solely on the PLO the responsibility of sustaining, especially financially, the people in the oPT²⁵.

For these reasons, in December 1988, ‘Arafāt signalled to the US that he would make a declaration meeting their conditions at the following UN General Assembly, which would be held in Geneva to allow for his participation. The speech ‘Arafāt gave from the podium on the 13th of December was written in cooperation with the US State Department, and was conceived aiming at satisfying all conditions, but the US claimed that the Chairman had made some *impromptu* changes, and therefore he had not satisfied Washington’s demands, especially concerning terrorism. Consultation followed between the Palestinians, Arab and allied states and the US, to decide whether to specify the declaration in a press conference, or to choose intransigence²⁶

Finally, the former prevailed, as recalled by ‘Abbās: “The whole purpose of our new approach as expressed in the PNC resolutions was to win over adversaries and embarrass our enemies or make them change their position. Arafat knew this and sought a way out that would put the Americans in a tight corner and force them to initiate a dialogue.”²⁷ Therefore, the Chairman convened a press conference the following day in which he clarified his previous declaration to the satisfaction of the US Department of State: “Let me

²² Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 47-48.

²³ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 23-24.

²⁴ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 395.

²⁵ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 386-87.

²⁶ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 31-33.

²⁷ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 32.

clarify my viewpoint in front of you. Our desire for peace is a strategy and not a temporary tactic [...] As for terrorism, I declared unequivocally yesterday, and repeat now, that we totally and categorically renounce all forms of individual, collective and state-sponsored terrorism”²⁸, famously concluding his speech with the phrase: “Enough, do you want me to striptease?”²⁹

Two days later, the US Ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Pelletreau, met in Tunis Yasir ‘Abd Rabbuh, formally opening the first official contact between a US administration and the PLO³⁰.

In conclusion, the Intifāda was a defining moment for the future of the peace negotiations, but also confirmed some features of the PLO that would shape the conduct of the peace process by the Palestinians for the years to come, until and after Oslo.

The uprising was confirmed to be the definitive factor in the process of centring the main focus of the Palestinian resistance movement in the occupied Territories, rather than in the Diaspora or in attacks against Israel proper. This process, which began already in 1982, led to a weakening of the more radical factions in the PLO, and consequently of their Arab patrons (Syria, Iraq and Libya), and conversely to an emboldening of the moderates, namely the PCP, DFLP and Fath, which had always insisted on the importance of a negotiated solution based on the oPT³¹.

This happened not only because the smaller radical factions had no significant following in the Territories, but also because the militants of the Intifāda themselves pushed for the oPT’s liberation, rather than that of the whole Historic Palestine, which was often what Diaspora Palestinians aimed at, since many of their homes were in what was considered Israel. This encouraged the recourse to diplomacy, since the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank was recognised formally at the international level as a breach of international law, and even in Israel it was seen by the majority as a temporary measure to ensure the security of the state, rather than a long-term occupation aimed at annexation, at least at that time³².

Therefore, the empowerment of a more moderate political solution by the protest in the Territories naturally favoured the strategy of ‘Arafāt, whose policy since 1974 was to achieve diplomatic contacts with the USA to establish an autonomous Palestinian entity in the oPT. Furthermore, the Territories had mostly been insulated by the internal power struggles happening in the PLO central organs in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and therefore the popularity of the Chairman was still untouched by the recriminations about, for example,

²⁸ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 32-33.

²⁹ Aburish, *Arafat*, 215.

³⁰ “Overall Chronology”, 1988.

³¹ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 39.

³² Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 384.

the battles in Lebanon of the openings towards Jordan: his popularity was not bound by party membership, since ‘Arafāt supporters often outnumbered Fath ones³³.

‘Arafāt understood that the moment allowed him to pursue his diplomatic strategy, and acted accordingly: he used the recentring of Palestinian politics in the Territories to force the weakened post-‘87 PLO to finally accept his objectives in the 19th PNC, and to endorse his search for diplomatic contacts, drawing on the strength of the mobilisation in the Territories pushing for these aims and on his unquestioned support.

Conversely, he employed his control of funds and associations to control the evolution of the uprising, aiming to further his diplomatic strategy, rather than to develop the Intifāda to its full potential. The reason for this strategic choice by ‘Arafāt was that an empowerment of the local figures could have led to the creation of alternative leadership, which he worried could undermine his power or generate unwanted consequences, ultimately damaging his talks with the USA.

In fact, apart from the effects on the internal Palestinian politics, the Intifāda also restored the consideration of the Palestinian Question by regional and international actors. This was achieved not by armed attacks by Palestinian militias, but by a wide-reaching, sustained, popular campaign of civil disobedience. Once the harsh repressive response of Israel showed its complete uselessness in controlling the uprising, and the world started to show sympathy towards the Palestinians, this forced Reagan and Shamir to appreciate the changed situation, both in Tunis but also in the Territories³⁴.

Although the Intifāda led to increased international attention towards what was happening in the Territories and scrutiny of the conduct of Israelis, this still did not convince Washington and Tel Aviv to consider the PLO as a partner in a possible solution, trying instead to find complaisant interlocutors outside the Organisation among the Palestinians in the oPT. But ‘Arafāt, thanks to the already mentioned control he had on the local leadership, was able to stall all contacts which did not include him.

Finally, pressed by the continuing of the uprising, the temporary disappearance of the Jordanian option after King Ḥusayn retreat in 1988 and the unwavering loyalty of the “inside” Palestinians, the USA signalled it was ready to open a dialogue with the PLO, given the acceptance of the conditions postulated by Kissinger in 1975: the meeting of the UNGA in Geneva therefore marked the beginning of these contacts³⁵, which as was seen can be directly linked to the eruption of the Intifāda.

The significance of the Intifāda, therefore, in the context of the peace process, was not only that it convinced the USA and Israel of the untenability of the occupation, presenting them with an unconventional challenge in the form of a widespread grassroots campaign of civil disobedience, but also that it definitely shifted the *locus* of Palestinian politics in the

³³ Cobban, “The PLO and the “Intifada””, 230.

³⁴ Zittrain Eisenberg, “The Israeli-Palestinian peace process, 1967-1993”, 88.

³⁵ Spiegel, “The United States, 1948-1993”, 304.

Territories. This meant that the “inside” Palestinians understood that they had to fight for their own liberation, rather than to count on the exiled leadership or other Arab states: consequently, this empowered ‘Arafāt and the other representative of the moderate PLO to pursue their long-held idea of a diplomatic solution, drawing strength from the newfound awareness of the oPT Palestinians.

Notwithstanding this, the initiatives born from the mobilisation also testified to the weaknesses of the PLO, and the increasingly difficult situation in which it found itself, as will be seen in the following paragraph.

2. The Gulf War and the PLO’s difficulties

The new diplomatic openings generated by the Intifāḍa and ‘Arafāt’s moves instilled new vigour in the hopes of significant developments in the search for a political solution. Unfortunately, the PLO was in a weakened position, while Israel still showed intransigence regarding its proposals. The new US President, Bush Sr., although slightly more sympathetic to the Palestinians compared to Reagan, was unable to act as a meaningful mediator, leading to a cessation of the dialogue after 1990.

The lack of progress reflected negatively on the PLO, and especially on the Chairman: the militants in the Territories were starting to feel the weight of Israel’s repression, the lack of progress and the financial duress of the PLO. Furthermore, the Islamists began to capitalise on Tunis’ difficulties, gaining support for their radical, militant vision.

Pressed by these difficulties, ‘Arafāt turned to the only figure in the region who could restore some of its standing in the eyes of the Palestinians: Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. The Iraqi leader had the advantage of being perceived as the only Arab leader supporting the Palestinians without ulterior motives, opposing both the USA and Israel, and Arab moderates. Furthermore, Ḥusayn also had the advantage, for Tunis, of not being involved in the attempts to control the PLO or the Palestinians, since he had been focused on its conflict with Iran in the previous years.

It was this newfound alignment that led to the decisions of the Chairman to back Baghdad in its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990: this proved to be as significant as the Intifāḍa for the negotiations, since the harsh reaction of the US and the other Arab states later forced the PLO to accept the adverse conditions set for the Madrid Conference.

This paragraph will explore the deteriorating environment in which ‘Arafāt had to conduct his diplomatic strategy from 1989, with the proposed plans in these years retracing the plan proposed in the Camp David Accords of 1978, and how this established a deteriorating pattern that led to the alliance with Iraq. Then, we will analyse the drastic consequences of Tunis’ endorsement of the invasion of Kuwait and how they led to a marked deterioration

at the diplomatic level for the Palestinians. Washington and Tel Aviv were therefore able to impose additional restrictions on the Palestinian side in the upcoming Madrid Conference.

Neither the involvement of some local leaders nor the renewed diplomatic contacts brought innovative solutions concerning the future of the Territories: the various proposals that succeeded one another were mainly variations of the autonomy plan proposed by Egypt and Israel at Camp David. This can be explained by the fact that 'Arafāt had always rejected the Camp David Accords based on their exclusion of the PLO, rather than for their contents, but the general hostility of Palestinian and Arab actors had forced him to reject them in their entirety, until the Intifāda allowed him to repropose them with the inclusion of the PLO³⁶. Furthermore, although local intellectuals were involved in talks with US officials, they acted merely as delegates of Tunis, and they generally were reluctant to make practical suggestions, whether because of the Chairman's orders or self-censorship³⁷.

Therefore, Shultz's proposal of March '88³⁸, Shamir's in May '89³⁹, Egypt's in September '89⁴⁰, Baker's in October '89⁴¹ and several other unofficial contacts between the Palestinians and US or Israeli citizens⁴² all shared common points. Negotiations were to be based on the provisions of Resolutions 242 and 338, therefore accepting the principle of land-for-peace, meaning Israeli forces would have to withdraw from the Territories, as well as the uncontested existence of Israel inside of its pre-1967 borders. Furthermore, negotiations would be split into two phases: an initial transitional one, which would result in the Israeli withdrawal and the creation of different, depending on the proposal, Palestinian organs of self-government in the oPT, and a second one, which would deal with the most contentious issues of the Palestinian Question, which were at this time not specified.

These were the less controversial points of the negotiations: the problems that ultimately led to the failure of these talks concerned the nature of the Palestinian delegation and the elections with which the members of said delegation would be chosen. Regarding the former aspect, the PLO insisted that the delegation would be composed only of Palestinians

³⁶ Aburish, *Arafat*, 157-59.

³⁷ Cobban, "The PLO and the "Intifada"", 221.

³⁸ "The Shultz Negotiations Plan", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/23222/shultz-negotiations-plan>.

³⁹ "Israel's "Peace Initiative", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/9684/israels-peace-initiative>.

⁴⁰ "Egypt's Ten-Point Response to Israel's Election Plan in the West Bank and Gaza Strip", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/23238/egypts-ten-point-response-israels-election-plan-west-bank-and-gaza-strip>.

⁴¹ "Secretary of State James Baker's: Five Points Framework for an Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/23240/secretary-state-james-bakers-five-points-framework-israeli-palestinian-dialogue>.

⁴² Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 24-5, 54-57.

and would represent just them, while Israel and the USA pushed for a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation, thinking that this would weaken Palestinian national claims and force the PLO to confront Jordan, diminishing its power. The contrast concerning the elections instead hinged upon who could vote, with Israel wanting to exclude Palestinians from Jerusalem and the Diaspora, and who could be elected, with the PLO insisting that recognised PLO members could run and be elected. Furthermore, although both sides accepted the idea of a multi-lateral conference to settle all disputes between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the ring states, Tel Aviv highlighted the multilateral aspect, while Tunis gave more importance to direct negotiations.

The two contentious points could be attributed in reality to a single aspect, that is, the direct participation of the PLO in the talks regarding the future of the Territories: Israel still vehemently opposed it, since it still considered it a terrorist organisation and banned any contact with it. Rabin himself, who would later oversee the Oslo Accords, expressed what the Israelis were ready to grant to the Palestinians: “They deserve to have an entity. Not the PLO, not a state, but a separate entity.”⁴³

The truth was that, notwithstanding the Intifāḍa, ‘Arafāt was still in a weakened position, isolated by other Arab nations and incapable of utilising what had been one of the major tactics with which to put pressure on the Israelis and impose on them his own conditions, namely the armed struggle. Therefore, the only chances of success for him came from the contacts with Washington, which, however, was still very much sensitive to Israel’s conditions⁴⁴. Nevertheless, the Chairman still placed great hopes in this dialogue, believing that the USA would be able to pressure Israel, especially with the new Bush Sr. administration, to offer some concession to the Palestinians, especially given the “free concessions” the PLO had already conceded (the UN Resolutions, Israel’s right of existence, renunciation of the armed struggle), without receiving much in return⁴⁵.

But the dialogue between the PLO and the USA was dismally lacking in progress:

“In all likelihood, never in the history of “dialogues” had communication been as absent as it was in these official Palestinian-American encounters. The American ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Pelletreau, and the Palestinian member of the Executive Committee, Yasser Abd Rabbo, [...] Reciting from prepared scripts, neither listened to the other as both were captives of the stilted discourse of rigid officialdom.”⁴⁶

The lack of progress during the whole of 1989 started to seriously damage ‘Arafāt’s standing in the Territories, his most crucial constituency, which was the most interested in the negotiations. This was compounded by the worsening situation on the ground: after

⁴³ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 384.

⁴⁴ Ibrahim, “A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy”, 32-33.

⁴⁵ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 640.

⁴⁶ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 59.

two years of uprising, Israel had started to employ a more effective way of repressing protestors, who were feeling the sting of these tactics and of the reduced financial assistance of the PLO. This led to increased support for Ḥamas and the PIJ, and the emergence of groups dedicated to the elimination of suspected collaborators among the Palestinians, initiating a period of internal violence that further weakened the mobilisation⁴⁷.

The stalled dialogue with the US came to an end in June 1990, when ‘Arafāt failed to condemn the attempted raid by the PLF of the previous month near Tel Aviv, which caused Washington to sever all contact with the PLO. The consequences of this event would have been severe if they had not been overshadowed by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August⁴⁸.

The decision of ‘Arafāt to align himself and the PLO with Baghdad during its invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War emerged from the choices he made during this difficult period of stalled negotiations and increasing strain in the oPT. Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and ‘Arafāt had in fact converging interests in the late ‘80s, which led the two leaders to draw closer: first of all, after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Baghdad was free to redirect its oil and armaments to sustain the PLO. Although not at the level of the financial aid of the Gulf monarchies in the ‘70s, these resources were badly needed by Tunis, especially after Jordan cut ties with the Territories, and conversely allowed the Iraqi leader to launch his bid for the leadership of the Arab fold⁴⁹.

Furthermore, Ṣaddām Ḥusayn’s fiery rhetoric against the USA and Israel, together with its huge army and developed ballistic missile program, elicited the support of the Palestinians, who saw him as a staunch opposer of the Israeli occupation. It was also for this reason that ‘Arafāt decided to ally with Iraq and resort to the same radical speech of its leader (the Chairman defined a new Iraqi ballistic missile as “a gift to the intifada”⁵⁰), hoping that this would increase its waning popularity in the Territories, especially with the evident lack of progress in the negotiations⁵¹.

The event that pushed the PLO squarely into the Iraqi camp was the termination of the talks with the USA in June ‘90: ‘Arafāt could not act against the PLF both because the group had for a long time been outside of the Chairman’s control, and because it was supported by Iraq. Therefore, the PLO leadership could not risk losing the support of its only Arab backer, which would also mean an additional loss of popularity in the Territories, where the public opinion was moving more and more towards the acceptance of violent confrontations against the Israelis. The USA failed to understand this, frustrated both with Israel and the PLO, and decided to terminate the dialogue with Tunis: this led ‘Arafāt to

⁴⁷ Aburish, *Arafat*, 220.

⁴⁸ Spiegel, “The United States, 1948-1993”, 304.

⁴⁹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 639-40.

⁵⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 640.

⁵¹ Gause, “The Gulf War as Arab Civil War”, 28.

turn to the only actor still willing to offer him unconditional support, namely Ḥusayn. The timing of this decisive PLO-Iraqi realignment could not have been worse: the August invasion of Kuwait by Iraq placed ‘Arafāt in front of the choice whether to support Ḥusayn’s actions, or to join the increasing chorus of critics coming from the Gulf states and the West: tied irrevocably to Baghdad, but also certain of Iraqi military strength and the fact that the US would not intervene in an inter-Arab dispute, both serious misreadings of the internal Iraqi and international situation, decided to side with the Ḥusayn⁵².

In the days immediately following the invasion, as in the succeeding months, ‘Arafāt kept refusing to openly denounce Iraqi actions, as well as opposing any non-Arab intervention in the crisis, even after the UN condemned the invasion and the international coalition started to assemble (the coalition also included Arab states, such as Syria and Saudi Arabia). Other than the already described pre-invasion affinity between Ḥusayn and ‘Arafāt, the Iraqi strategy of linking an eventual withdrawal from Kuwait with that of the Israeli forces from the oPT, and the missile attacks towards Israel elicited additional support from the Palestinians, especially in the Territories, which pushed Tunis not to renege its previous commitments⁵³.

The reality was that the Chairman was trying to navigate a difficult situation, maintaining both its Gulf links and the alliance with Baghdad, ensuring an Arab political solution to the crisis. He unfortunately lacked the political awareness of the mutated international situation, which was definitely heading towards a foreign armed reaction. The consequent positioning of the PLO was again derived from ‘Arafāt’s absolute decision-making power, which left little space for the objections of those who had the lucidity to better evaluate the situation. For example, ‘Ashrāwī, in a phone call already on the 2nd of August with the PLO offices in Tunis, said:

You must come up with a statement; we must take a public position against the occupation [of Kuwait, Ed.]. [...] Morally and politically, we as Palestinians must be the first to condemn occupation. Find Abu Ammar [‘Arafāt, Ed.] and ask him to issue an official release. [...] The whole moral foundation of our case, particularly of the intifada, will be destroyed. We have to be consistent. We must take a position of integrity against occupation anywhere and whatever the reasons. Let’s do that first and then try to play a constructive role in bringing this disaster to a peaceful end. [...] But the absence of a leadership position will confuse our public opinion. The gap will be filled by a popular emotional reaction.⁵⁴

The consequences of these choices were devastating for the whole PLO: after the defeat of Iraq in February 1991, Tunis found itself completely isolated politically, both in the region and globally. The US and Israel could accuse the Palestinians, who had also shown popular

⁵² Aburish, *Arafat*, 221-25.

⁵³ Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 92-93.

⁵⁴ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 69-70.

support for the invasion, of not being sincere in their peaceful intentions, while the Arab states now had the excuse to disregard the Palestinian cause, since 'Arafāt had supported an attack on an Arab state from another Arab one⁵⁵.

But the most serious reaction came from the Gulf monarchies, and obviously from Kuwait itself: they felt that the Palestinians, and 'Arafāt specifically, had betrayed them, even after all the aid that they had donated. Therefore, they decided to cut all financial aid to the PLO and the Territories, while Kuwait expelled the numerous Palestinian refugees who resided in its territory, eliminating an important source of revenues from their remittances⁵⁶.

If the situation of the PLO before 1990 could be described as difficult, but still with some openings and diplomatic levers, after the Gulf War it became increasingly desperate. First of all, the financial situation became unsustainable: having lost the Jordanian (after 1988), Gulf and Iraqi funds, since the latter were destined to Iraq's reconstruction after the War, Tunis soon came under critical economic stress⁵⁷.

Under the political aspect, the PLO still suffered from the isolation of the pre-Gulf War period, but it was now under renewed pressure to enter talks with the Israelis with fewer political endorsements, having lost the political support of Iraq and having antagonised the Gulf. Furthermore, after achieving such a complete victory against Iraq, Washington felt that the moment was ripe to shape the region, resolving its remaining conflicts in its favour and that of its allies⁵⁸.

This active involvement of the US meant that Bush Sr. was determined to arrive at a settlement of the Palestinian Question. In addition to this, Israel was now in a position of strength, since it had seen its major opponent, Baghdad, badly beaten, and enjoying the renewed support of the USA, which had to recompense Israel for abstaining from involvement in the international coalition against Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and from reacting to Iraqi missile launches. Furthermore, 'Arafāt had also lost the support of the other major global power, the USSR, since in '91 it was struggling with its own internal crisis, which would soon lead to its dissolution, and was trying to ensure Western and Israeli support, even greatly relaxing restrictions on Jewish emigration towards Israel⁵⁹.

On the ground, the Intifāḍa mostly exhausted its effectiveness: although Israel was not able to totally eradicate militants' organisations, it had by 1991 restored a degree of control on the Territories. This, in turn, led to an increase in violent attacks that favoured the Islamists, who had always supported violent struggle against the Israelis: this put further pressure on the PLO, which started to see its support in the Territories decrease⁶⁰.

⁵⁵ Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 93-94.

⁵⁶ Karsh, "The Middle East and the Gulf War", 173-74.

⁵⁷ Said Zahlan, *Palestine and the Gulf States*, 94.

⁵⁸ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 54-55.

⁵⁹ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 33-35.

⁶⁰ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 638.

‘Arafāt was acutely aware of these problems and tried desperately to solve some of them, to at least balance the pressure that was starting to mount to accept the US-Israeli conditions for the beginning of the talks. But, the attempts to mend relations with the Gulf, the USA or the Israeli Likud government proved unsuccessful, and furthermore Jordan, Syria and Egypt moved to various degrees to isolate the PLO and to push it towards yielding to Washington⁶¹.

It was clear that this time ‘Arafāt could not avoid the consequences of his choices, as it was made clear to him by the US President himself: “The PLO had “backed the wrong horse”, said President Bush.”⁶² The Chairman, therefore, had to concede to the reality of his situation, claiming: “Dear brothers, God bless those who know their real status. We cannot confront the Americans, Russians and Arabs all at the same time.”⁶³

Consequently, ‘Arafāt gave his permission to the local leadership in the Territories to accept the invitation of the new Secretary of State Baker to define the format of the upcoming negotiations. This did not mean more freedom of action for them, since control by Tunis was still scrupulous and strict, but only that they could interact with US officials as representatives of the PLO. The reality was that, even if the local leadership had had more agency in setting its priorities, it would not have mattered, since the PLO, but also the Palestinians in general, were so weakened by the result of the Gulf War that the US knew they would accept any constraint, if it ensured the start of the negotiations: therefore, Washington focused on pleasing the Israeli pre-requisites, rather than caring for the Palestinian requests⁶⁴.

‘Ashrāwī was present at the meetings with Baker and summarised well the situation: “Faced as well with a hard-line Israeli Likud government led by the brittle and caustic Yitzhak Shamir, he [Baker, Ed.] thrust his energies full force toward what he considered the point of least resistance, the Palestinians. Any proposals that bounced off the Israeli brick wall, he would try to sell us as “the only way to get Israel into the process.” [...] Israel got all the carrots and asked for more; we got all the sticks in the form of morbid forecasts about the consequences of saying no.”⁶⁵

Throughout the eight trips to the region of Baker, from March to October 1991, the PLO was forced to concede on all the points of contention it had fought on before the Gulf War. The nascent Madrid Conference would see no direct participation of the PLO, a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation where there could not be Palestinians from the Diaspora or East Jerusalem, and the bilateral negotiations between Israel and its neighbours would

⁶¹ Aburish, *Arafat*, 232-33.

⁶² Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 54.

⁶³ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 54.

⁶⁴ Ibrahim, “A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy”, 43-46.

⁶⁵ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 84-85.

not be tied to progress with the discussion of the thematic issues in the multilaterals, and vice versa⁶⁶.

The attempt by the US to reassure the Palestinians and the PLO through the Letter of Assurance sent before the Conference to the Palestinians, ensuring them of the principle of land-for-peace and the respect of international law, could not mask the imbalances of the Conference⁶⁷. But 'Arafāt had few choices: he accepted the USA-URSS joint proposal, again without consulting the PLO central organs, the decision being rubber-stamped by the Central Council on the 17th of October 1991. Both Quray' and Mamdūh Nawfal, a member of the DFLP's and later FIDA's leadership, explained this decision, linking the need to rescue the PLO directly to the consequences of its positioning during the Gulf War: "Its [of the Palestinian leadership, Ed.] goal was to reverse the isolation of the PLO, freeing it from the huge political and financial burdens it bore as a result of the position adopted by the Palestinians in the Gulf War of 1990–91."⁶⁸ And "Arafat accepted these conditions in order to avoid more Palestinian losses and to rescue the PLO, which at the time was a pariah because of its perceived support of Saddam Hussein during the war."⁶⁹

If the Intifāda was the spark that helped the PLO to reignite its diplomatic contacts, it was the Gulf War that precipitated the conclusions that led to the Madrid Conference.

But, the unfavourable conditions for the PLO at the Conference were not only due to the consequences of the Palestinians' alignment with Ḥusayn's Iraq, although this was the most immediate cause. The difficulties of the PLO could be attributed to the preferences and structures created by its leadership in the previous years, also in response to the evolving regional conditions.

'Arafāt's attachment to diplomacy, which he had cultivated for a long time, in the '80s became the mainstream thought of the PLO, due to the loss of Lebanon and the rise in importance of the Territories in terms of activities, but above all as a source of legitimacy⁷⁰. It was due to these factors that the Chairman decided to use the uprising as a way to achieve contacts with the US, instead of prioritising its objectives. The reason for this desire was that he thought that Washington could force Tel Aviv to consent to some of the PLO's demands: this demonstrates an underestimation of the bond between the two countries, and a lack of perception of the weaknesses that plagued the PLO, whose problems of corruption and neo-patrimonialism were becoming unmanageable.

⁶⁶ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 85-87.

⁶⁷ "U.S. Letter of Assurances to the Palestinians", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/9745/us-letter-assurances-palestinians>.

⁶⁸ Ahmed Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem: The Palestinian Story of the Secret Negotiations* (I.B. Tauris, 2006), 35.

⁶⁹ Mamdouh Nofal, "Yasir Arafat, the Political Player: A Mixed Legacy", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2006.35.2.23>.

⁷⁰ Nigel Parsons, "The Palestine Liberation Organization", in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 215-16.

When the dialogue with the US started, and Tunis realised that Washington had no intention of pressuring the Israelis, 'Arafāt lost his major source of popularity and legitimacy, forcing him to find alternative ways to maintain his position and strategy. He therefore became more dependent on popular sentiment in the Territories and on the support of the only Arab state with which the Chairman did not have contrasts: Iraq⁷¹. The two sides reinforced each other, since in the Territories Ṣaddām Ḥusayn enjoyed growing support, leading 'Arafāt to move closer to Baghdad, receiving in exchange aid, which was used to support the oPT, which generated more enthusiasm towards Iraq.

It also has to be considered that all the decisions that were just described were taken by 'Arafāt alone, or eventually with the advice of a few members of his inner circle: this shows the level of centralisation that the Chairman had achieved in the period after the Intifāḍa. The calls for a more collective leadership from the opposition were by then little more than a rhetorical exercise, since 'Arafāt controlled both the finances and the appointments at every level of the Organisation, both in Tunis and in the Territories.

It was thanks to this control that he was able to direct the Intifāḍa and its leadership, turning it in his and his strategy's favour, as well as avoiding the development of an alternative power in the Territories⁷².

Yet, this also meant that each of his misjudgements had wide-spreading consequences for the whole of the PLO, and consequently for the Palestinians in general, and that his priorities took precedence over anything within the Palestinian resistance movement, sometimes obscuring the voices of those who had a clearer understanding of the situation. This was demonstrated, for example, by his insistence in using the uprising to achieve diplomatic contacts with the US, rather than to improve the living condition in the Territories or expanding the mobilisation, his misunderstanding of the nature of the US position in relation to Israel and the Palestinians, and finally, and most importantly, the true capabilities of the Iraqi army and the scope of the international reaction.

The centrality of 'Arafāt inside the PLO and its policy-making structures therefore had a substantial influence in the acceptance of the unfavourable conditions of the Madrid Conference: not only he was the one making the decisions, and therefore contributing to shaping the environment in which the PLO had to struggle, but he also limited the possibilities of other influencing and contrasting his choices, which ultimately were made based on his sole judgement. This led him, as can be expected, to persevere in his previous policies and maintain his control, rather than reacting accordingly to the latest development⁷³.

The just-mentioned desire of 'Arafāt to remain at the centre of power in the PLO meant that he had to control the negotiations, having lost all other means to influence Palestinian

⁷¹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 639-41.

⁷² Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 144-45.

⁷³ Aburish, *Arafat*, 224-25.

politics. But the limitations of the Madrid Conference prevented him from doing that: this, and the concern that the delegation may develop into an alternative leadership, led the Chairman to try to stall the negotiations at the Conference and search for alternative channels. The analysis of this process will be the object of the next paragraph.

3. Madrid and the search for an alternative

After having analysed the factors which allowed for the resumption of the diplomatic contacts and the genesis of the Madrid Conference, we will now see how the situation originating from this diplomatic format led to the need for a new one, which would coalesce into the Oslo channel in early 1993.

The Madrid Conference imposed many limitations on the Palestinians, first among others, the exclusion of any member of the PLO from directly participating.

Furthermore, the Israeli side had the possibility to dictate the nature of the Conference and shape it to its liking, while the Arab delegations, the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian-Jordanian ones, had to accept it unilaterally and also failed to establish any coordination between them. The only reason for 'Arafāt's acceptance of the invitation to the Conference was the desperate situation in which the PLO found itself in 1991.

To escape the negative conditions of the Madrid and later Washington rounds, the Chairman decided to adopt a strategy of intransigence at the talks, stalling them even before the dialogue covered the practical aspects: the two delegations were therefore stuck on procedural matters for weeks, before they could even broach the contents of an eventual agreement.

The reason for this stance was that Tunis hoped that by filibustering the negotiations, it could convince the US and Israel to abandon the Conference in favour of reopening direct contacts with the PLO, therefore avoiding the penalising restrictions of the previous talks.

Another reason that led 'Arafāt to search for an alternative forum to negotiate an agreement came from the nature of the Palestinian delegation sent to the Conference: this was composed both of Palestinian from the oPT (excluding East Jerusalem) who actively participated to the talks, and a directive committee with PLO members from the Territories, such as al-Ḥusaynī and 'Ashrāwī, who acted as a conduit between the discussions and Tunis.

The PLO leadership feared that the delegation, and even more the committee, could evolve into an alternative leadership, thanks to their popularity in the Territories and the daily contact with Western and Arab diplomats, reaching an agreement without the consent of Tunis and therefore marginalising 'Arafāt.

For this reason, the control by the leadership over the delegation was even more stringent

than it was at the time of the UNLU: numerous times, the whole team had to move from Washington to Tunis to explain some of its position and to receive instructions to be followed to the letter. The search for an alternative channel, which would materialise into the Oslo one, was also caused by this mistrust of 'Arafāt towards his own delegation.

To understand the need for the PLO to find an alternative way to negotiate with the Israelis, it is necessary to illustrate the limitations that the Madrid Conference imposed upon the Palestinians and the other Arab delegations in general.

Firstly, the Conference had no plenipotentiary power, meaning that any agreement reached during the talks would not be legally binding, necessitating the ratification of national institutions to enter into force. Tel Aviv insisted on this point as a means to guarantee itself the greatest degree of freedom possible towards the conclusions of the negotiations, including their refusal⁷⁴.

Israel had also achieved the division of the talks between four bilateral and a multilateral channel, with the advancement of one independent from the advancement of the other. In this way, Israeli negotiators could use the threat to block progress in one of the channels to force their position in the others. Furthermore, Israel could play the different Arab delegations one against the other by enhancing their suspicions and fears that one of the Arab states could conclude a separate agreement with Israel to achieve its goals, abandoning the others' claims. While Israel enjoyed the benefits of the collaboration with the USA and the inaction of the other co-sponsor, the USSR, the Arab states lacked an efficient cooperation mechanism, often failing to share information or to forewarn the others of their intentions⁷⁵.

However, the most skewed aspect of the Conference concerned the negotiations with the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Although its composition, on the Palestinian side, was determined directly by the PLO, Israel determined its parameters and had veto power on any member it considered to breach its conditions: PLO members were excluded, as well as any Palestinian coming from outside of the Territories or from East Jerusalem. This power of excluding certain representatives from the delegation on suspicion of PLO membership was not limited on the preparatory phase of the delegation, but it was used also during the Conference: for example, the Israelis demanded that Ṣā'ib 'Urayqāt, a member of the delegation, was forbidden to participate in the negotiations, after he said that the delegation to Madrid was selected and directed by Tunis (which, although true, could not be admitted because it would violate the conditions set by the USA for the Conference) and after he presented himself wearing the *ḥaṭṭa*, the traditional Palestinian headwear⁷⁶.

⁷⁴ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 61-62.

⁷⁵ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 64-66.

⁷⁶ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 131, 148-49.

Concerning the practical terms of the negotiations, the Israelis initially refused to talk separately with the Palestinians, insisting that the latter had to conduct all talks together with the Jordanians. After an agreement was found concerning this matter (two Jordanians delegates would be present among the Palestinian delegation when this would discuss alone with the Israeli one) Tel Aviv started imposing limits on what could be addressed: the settlements, the situation around Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees and their right to return were to be reserved for the final status negotiations, with Israeli representatives refusing to even discuss the possibility of temporary pauses in settlement expansion⁷⁷. Furthermore, they boycotted the multilateral working groups on refugees and water resources, claiming that those matters were final status issues to be discussed directly with the Palestinians, the former, and the Palestinians, Jordanians and Syrians, the latter⁷⁸. These contrasts, rather than constituting accidental solvable problems, point to the fundamental difference in perception regarding the nature of the Conference and its objectives by the two sides. For the Israelis, the talks were a way to achieve the most at the best conditions they could: this meant reaching definitive compromises with the Arab ring states and forcing the Palestinians to accept an agreement favourable to the Israelis. As for what it concerned the latter, while Shamir aimed at dragging the negotiations while Israeli forces created new facts-on-the-ground, compelling the PLO to accept a much reduced entity, Rabin was more interested in finding an agreement through diplomacy⁷⁹. For the Arabs, but for the Palestinians specifically, the Madrid-Washington talks were intended as the beginning of a process of interaction with the Israelis, which would then lead to negotiations concerning the conclusion of agreements or peace talks⁸⁰.

This difference in the perception and scope of the Conference influenced not only the initial conditions set by the USA, but also the matters being discussed when the actual talks started: dialogue with the Jordanians, which was in theory the one where it would be easier to arrive to a complete peace agreement, was blocked by the fact that Amman could not agree to anything, publicly, before matters with the Palestinians were at least starting to progress. For what it concerned the Syrians and the Lebanese, they both requested the complete withdrawal of all Israeli forces within their internationally recognised borders, including the disputed Golan Heights, before any negotiations could even begin. The Israelis responded by proposing limited withdrawals, to be further negotiated, and demanding guarantees of their own. The negotiations therefore quickly stalled, with Israel unable to modify the Arab states' position, due to the public opinion backlash they would be subjected to if they conceded, and the Arab states unable to change the Israeli stance,

⁷⁷ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 101-4.

⁷⁸ Spiegel, "The United States, 1948-1993", 305.

⁷⁹ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 70-72.

⁸⁰ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 410.

which benefited from Israel's position of strength and the support of the USA⁸¹.

By far the most unsuccessful and sterile discussions were the ones between the Israelis and the Palestinians: this was because, at least during Shamir's term, the objective of the Israelis was to stall the negotiations long enough to create an overwhelmingly favourable situation on the ground, through the massive expansion of the settlements and the increasing repression of the protests⁸². Shamir proved this when he claimed that "he aimed at extending the negotiations for ten years so that Israel could build up new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and bring in more Jewish emigrants."⁸³

The first tactic the Israelis employed to delay negotiations with the Palestinians was their insistence that there would be no separate track between the Jordanian and Palestinian bilateral talks. For them, the joint delegation meant that issues concerning Jordan and the oPT would be dealt with within a single bilateral channel. This was unacceptable for the Palestinians, as the Israelis obviously knew, who feared a revival of the Jordanian option, as well as for the Jordanians, who, after 1988, had vowed not to represent the Territories on the international stage. Therefore, the scenario that repeated itself until January 1992, when an agreement was reached on separate tracks, was this: "Our delegation would dutifully proceed to the State Department every morning and head for the locked meeting room, then turn to the waiting room and wait. The heads of delegations would meet in the corridor and play a rerun of the irresistible force-immovable object drama."⁸⁴ Needless to say, the so-called "corridor diplomacy" failed to achieve any advancement in the talks.

After January '92, when the negotiations actually started, progress soon proved unattainable due to the already mentioned fundamental differences between the ideas of the Palestinians and the Israelis at the Conference. The former started by demanding that Israel stop committing human rights violations in the Territories, which the latter refused. The Palestinian delegation, therefore, decided to present to the Israelis and the press a list of daily violations before any meeting, again with few results:

"We also started presenting the Israeli delegation with a daily list of human rights violations at the beginning of every meeting. They refused to accept the lists. So I decided to start every briefing by announcing these human rights abuses, attempting to bring home to the media the human substance of the talks underway. [...] That did not work either. The Americans felt that reminding the Israelis of their cruelties was not in the service of the peace process."⁸⁵

Then, the Palestinian delegation tried to introduce in the talks the issue of the settlements, the military government of the Territories and land and water management. The delegates

⁸¹ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 104-5, 183-85, 212.

⁸² Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 412.

⁸³ Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 64.

⁸⁴ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 162.

⁸⁵ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 173.

proposed a ban on the issuance of new military orders and allowing the Palestinians to register their land acquisitions, hoping that this would help in creating better conditions for self-government. These proposals coalesced in March '92 into a document called the *Expanded Outline of a Palestinian Interim Self-Government Arrangement*, of which the most important point was the statement that the oPT were occupied territories, and therefore subjected to international law, specifically the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Israeli response was the *Interim Self-Government Arrangement Negotiations* document, which instead claimed that the Territories were disputed territories, and their legal status was uncertain: the rest of the negotiations mainly hinged around the discussion on these two documents and their implications⁸⁶.

The Israeli delegation was openly employing delaying manoeuvres, refusing to discuss the fundamental issues of the Palestinian Question, dividing the Arab delegations by hoping to achieve separate agreements, and marginalising the Palestinians with the tacit approval of the USA, which kept its impartiality, with the result of favouring Tel Aviv. But it is also true that the Palestinian delegation was using similar tactics to achieve what was its other objective, other than alleviating the conditions of the Territories: namely, the inclusion of the PLO in the talks⁸⁷.

Although it was an open secret that the PLO central leadership had selected all the members of the delegation and that the steering committee was composed of people directly involved with the Organisation to various degrees, both the “outside” and the “inside” were convinced that only the PLO had the right to represent the Palestinians, and therefore that an agreement could be reached only through direct negotiation between Tel Aviv and Tunis.

For this reason, ‘Arafāt instructed the delegation to assume an uncompromising position on every matter in the talks, from procedural, as for the separate track between Palestinians and Jordanians, to practical ones, trying to negotiate on issues that were specifically and explicitly reserved for later talks, to even openly challenging the USA and Israel, such as with the *ḥatta* of ‘Urayqāt or with declaration concerning the alignment of the delegation with the PLO in Tunis⁸⁸.

The importance of direct negotiations with the PLO was so pivotal that ‘Arafāt prioritised them even to the detriment of the possibilities of an agreement, if this did not include a direct channel with Tunis. This was testified by Nawfal on the occasion of the openings made by the new Israeli Labour government in 1992: “With the impasse continuing, Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin began testing the waters with the PLO. Meeting were held with Arafat’s emissaries, but he ordered the “inside” delegation in Washington to harden

⁸⁶ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 68-71.

⁸⁷ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 68.

⁸⁸ Mamdouh Nofal (spelled Mamdouh Naufal in the article), “Arafat, de Madrid à Taba”, *Revue d'Études Palestiniennes* 96 (Summer 2005): 39-40, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1641043>.

its positions even further.”⁸⁹

Other than an ideological position concerning the exclusive right of Palestinian representation of the PLO, direct negotiations with the PLO would not only help escape the unfavourable conditions set in the Madrid Conference, but also consolidate the position of the Palestinian leadership in the future negotiations they envisioned, especially on the final status issues⁹⁰.

Apart from the just-mentioned reasons for the inclusion of the PLO in the talks, ‘Arafāt was also motivated by another factor, namely the ever-stronger belief that the Palestinians in Madrid could marginalise Tunis and constitute themselves as an alternative leadership. Although this fear was already present from the days of the first contacts in 1988 during the Intifāda, it grew during the negotiations in Madrid and especially in Washington, because the delegation enjoyed greater media exposure and had a more immediate contact with Israel and the USA, but also with all the other participants to the Conference⁹¹.

Therefore, ‘Arafāt insisted that no progress was to be made in the negotiations, both to show that an agreement was not possible if the PLO kept being excluded from the talks, but also to keep the delegation of “inside” Palestinians in check. To do so, he employed various tactics, first of all, the establishment of a strong control over any decision the delegation had to make. But he also made several public moves that clarified the links between the Palestinians at the Conference and in Tunis, and the supremacy of the latter. This began even before the beginning of the talks, for example when in Amman, in September ’91, during the signing of the agreement with the Jordanians concerning the nature and objectives of the joint delegation, he used ‘Urayqāt (the member of the delegation closer to the leadership) to propose that the Palestinians of the delegation sign an oath of loyalty to the PLO and the Chairman, which they refused, claiming they had already proved their loyalty⁹².

He also kept inflating the delegation with “advisors” with poorly defined roles. ‘Arafāt sent them both to maintain his neo-patrimonial power and reduce any possible opposition to the talks, but also to monitor the most known Palestinian personalities in the delegation, as ‘Ashrāwī illustrates:

“Abu Ammar was giving out promises and commitments to hundreds of people who felt they had the right to be on the delegation. The category of “advisers” was swelling out of recognition with all of the political personalities and activists who needed to be recognized

⁸⁹ Nofal (Naufal), “Arafat, de Madrid à Taba”, 40, my translation.

⁹⁰ Sela, “The PLO at Fifty”, 317-18.

⁹¹ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 416.

⁹² Aburish, *Arafat*, 238-39.

and placated. Abu Ammar knew that anyone who felt excluded would then be negative, another voice for the opposition.”⁹³

Furthermore: “Some [of the delegates, Ed.] came to work, others to prove a point, still others to make sure that we would not start forming an “alternative leadership.””⁹⁴

Other than these more “covert” stratagems, ‘Arafāt also used more direct ways to control the negotiations: namely, he required that any decision be agreed with Tunis before it could be discussed with the Israelis. In this, he was advantaged by several characteristics of the Palestinian delegation: it was composed of professionals, rather than politicians (due to the conditions set by the USA), and it had less time to prepare because of the long negotiations concerning its relationship with the Jordanian delegation. Therefore, the Palestinian delegates depended on the PLO leadership for advice on policy decisions, as they were dependent on ‘Arafāt for funding and the covering of expenses⁹⁵.

A typical interaction between the delegation and Tunis would happen like this:

“When issues requiring expert knowledge were under discussion, Palestinians at the negotiating table would send points to PLO experts outside the hall, who would in turn obtain instructions from Tunis. Faisal Husseini described this process as *‘fax politica’*.”⁹⁶

Other times, the Chairman would summon the whole delegation, advisors included, to Tunis to receive updates on the state of the negotiations. Other than redundant, since he was already informed of any development, these meetings were also in breach of the conditions of the Conference, which prohibited any direct contact between the delegation and Tunis. But, for ‘Arafāt, they symbolised his power over the delegation, and consequently, on the whole peace process⁹⁷.

The problem of this relationship was that the priorities of the two poles were slowly starting to diverge, notwithstanding the control by the PLO leadership and, conversely, the loyalty of the delegation towards Tunis. In fact, the PLO leadership aimed for its inclusion in the talks, therefore ordering the delegation to be uncooperative and often taking decisions above the delegates’ heads to present itself as the only possible interlocutor. The Palestinians in Washington, instead, since almost all of them came from the Territories, increasingly started to worry about the practical matters of the negotiations and the situation on the ground, trying to reach compromises with the Israeli sides⁹⁸.

Although the delegation always insisted that the PLO had to be included in the dialogue and never conceded to the offers by the USA and Israel to create an alternative leadership,

⁹³ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 130.

⁹⁴ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 144.

⁹⁵ Ibrahim, “A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy”, 76.

⁹⁶ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 416.

⁹⁷ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 149.

⁹⁸ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 68-75.

‘Arafāt kept feeling excluded. Consequently, he continued to ignore advice from the Palestinians in Madrid-Washington, instead following his own diplomatic strategy, starting from the preparatory stage. For example, in September ’91, he accepted the joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation against his (and the local leadership's) previous pledges, only so negotiations could start. Or, he kept insisting on contacts with the US after al-Ḥusaynī, ‘Ashrāwī and others had told him that Washington had no intention to pressure the Israelis, and, in March and April ‘92, he paradoxically ordered the delegation to continue the “corridor diplomacy” while maintaining its original tough stance⁹⁹.

A conversation between Nawfal and ‘Arafāt illustrates this situation perfectly:

“[Nawfal said, Ed.] “Brother Abu Ammar, why don’t you let the delegation from the inside reach an agreement? We can then build on their achievement and continue negotiating ourselves in the name of the PLO to obtain another agreement.” But he [‘Arafāt, Ed.] replied: “This would be a big mistake. You are too good-intentioned. If the negotiating team signs an agreement, the Americans and the world community will consider them an alternative to the PLO. They will replace us and we will have to leave the party, without getting a single crumb.””¹⁰⁰

The Madrid Conference was one of the most complete attempts to find a solution both to the Palestinian Question and to the wider conflict that opposed Israel to the ring states. But for the Palestinians, and especially the PLO, it was a severely unequal one, designed to the Israeli advantage with the support of the USA and the quiescence of the USSR.

Notwithstanding this, in 1991 ‘Arafāt was in a desperate situation with limited choices, given the regional context and his previous commitment to diplomacy. Therefore, his acceptance of the restrictions of the Madrid Conference was the only way in which he thought the legitimacy of the PLO as an interlocutor could be reconstituted¹⁰¹.

However, it soon became clear that the Chairman had no intention of withstanding the constraints of the talks in Washington: he therefore ordered the delegation to adopt a rigid posture to avoid any advancement of the talks, helped in this by the Israeli equal unwillingness to compromise. His strategy was to convince the USA that no agreement with the Palestinians was possible if negotiations excluded the PLO and, consequently, ‘Arafāt.

At the same time, he made several attempts at opening alternative channels that bypassed the negotiations, both with representatives of the Israeli peace movement but also with US officials, hoping that these initial contacts, although indirect, could transform into a legitimate vehicle to reach a compromise¹⁰². These were also driven by the perception by

⁹⁹ Aburish, *Arafat*, 237, 239, 241-42.

¹⁰⁰ Nofal, “Yasir Arafat, the Political Player”, 30.

¹⁰¹ Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem*, 35.

¹⁰² Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 58, 67-68, 72-73, 99-101.

‘Arafāt that the delegation was outside his control. The members of the delegation, in fact, but also of the “shadow” delegation of al-Ḥusaynī and Ashrāwī, had to come from the Territories and could not be members of the PLO. They were thus outside of the structures that the Chairman had built during the years. The consequence of this was that they were not tied to him by client-patron relations, had an autonomous basis of legitimacy and deep knowledge of the conditions of the Palestinians, deriving from the fact of being community leaders and known local figures. Therefore, the lack of progress at the Conference was also used by ‘Arafāt to deny the delegates any success that could ultimately result in a weakening of his central position in Palestinian politics¹⁰³.

In conclusion, one could see how ‘Arafāt used the Madrid Conference in a similar way in which he used the Intifāḍa: rather than adapting to the circumstances, he exploited the situation to turn it again in his favour, stalling the negotiations and working to achieve his objectives.

But, what ultimately led ‘Arafāt to start direct negotiations with the Israelis, which had never been his first choice, was the increasingly difficult situation both internally in the PLO, but most importantly in the Territory, with the increasing violence of the uprising and popularity of the Islamists. As we will see in the next part of the chapter, these conditions, which ‘Arafāt’s strategy contributed to creating, were one of the determining factors that convinced the Chairman to pursue the talks in the Oslo channel.

4. Worsening circumstances and the acceptance of Oslo

For almost the first year of the Conference, no progress was made in the Palestinian-Israeli bilateral talks, and, as a consequence, in all the other channels of the negotiations.

The reason was the mutual unwillingness by Shamir and ‘Arafāt to make any concession to the other, the former to have more time to build settlements and weaken the Intifāḍa, the latter to escape the Conference and find an alternative channel with Washington. The rise to the office of Prime Minister of Labour politician Yitzhak Rabin in June 1992 gave some hope that negotiations could experience a significant shift, but this also soon proved mistaken, with the position of the two delegations remaining mostly unchanged.

The problem for ‘Arafāt, but also the wider PLO, was that the persisting uselessness of the negotiations started to have consequences also in the Territories: the tactics of the Israelis proved to be effective in repressing the, at this point, classic civil disobedience demonstrations of the earlier Intifāḍa. The answer of the Palestinian militants was to turn violent: this favoured the Islamists, who had always predicated the restart of the armed

¹⁰³ Aburish, *Arafat*, 242-43.

struggle.

The Territories increasingly became the scene of violent demonstration, in which clashes with the Israelis almost inevitably turned deadly, and attacks against both the settlers and the security forces, with the kidnappings and killings, whether in ambushes or during captivity.

The advancements of the Islamists led in turn to an increase in intra-Palestinian violence, between different factions and against suspected Israeli collaborators. This, together with the Israeli economic retaliatory measures and the financial crisis of the PLO, led to a drastic worsening of the living conditions in the Territories.

Thus, 'Arafāt saw his until then unshakable popularity in Historic Palestine starting to erode and understood that he had to obtain a result in the talks if he wanted to maintain his position of primacy in the Palestinian resistance movement. But he also knew that the weakened Palestinian position would force him to deal directly with the Israelis, without US mediation, and to make significant concessions. For this reason, he maintained the utmost secrecy concerning what would become the Oslo channel, fearing that a leak about the width of the talks, before a compromise was agreed, would generate backlash against him and the PLO.

The paragraph will therefore illustrate how the external conditions of the Territories acted as a pressure factor on the PLO leadership, influencing it to change some of its longstanding assumptions about the diplomatic strategy. This led to the initiation of contacts in London and then in Oslo, ultimately culminating in the DoP in the summer of 1993.

The strategy of 'Arafāt of delaying the negotiations in Washington, other than rendering the whole Madrid Conference ineffective, also had repercussions in the relationship between the public opinion in the Territories and the delegation, especially of its more exposed members, such as al-Ḥusaynī, 'Ashrāwī, Sarī Nussayba and Ḥaydar 'Abd al-Shāfī. The reason was that the initial enthusiasm which had accompanied their departure for the Conference was caused by the fact that the Palestinians hoped that diplomacy would soon improve their living conditions, put under severe strain after almost four years of Intifāḍa, and, in a not too distant future, end the Israeli occupation of their land.

This enthusiasm was widespread since before the beginning of the negotiations, even from the departure of the delegates from the oPT:

“Actually many people did come to bid us farewell. Families, friends, supporters, well-wishers, and the press showed up very early the next morning to see us off, give us last-minute advice, or interview us—as the case might be. [...] As we walked down the main stairs, some women began calling out encouragements in between back slapping, embracing, kissing, and handshaking.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 131.

Also the return from Madrid, where the opening ceremony and the first inconclusive round of talks were held, was celebrated by Palestinians everywhere:

Our homecoming was a festival. Thousands of Palestinians were planning on coming to Jericho to receive the returning delegation. The Israeli authorities immediately declared Jericho a closed military area, not open to the public. Closure notwithstanding, Jericho became a human celebration of hope and peace. [...] Jerusalem was a frenzy of excitement. All the energy and exuberance that had lain dormant during the years suddenly erupted. [...] The polls showed an unprecedented high of 87 percent support. While we were in Madrid Palestinians had started going around giving out flowers to soldiers and placing olive branches in the barrels of their guns.¹⁰⁵

The Palestinian delegation was deeply connected to the mood of the people in the Territories, being the most immediate connection of the Palestinians there with the negotiations, but also with the PLO, which was widely (and correctly) understood in the oPT to be behind the decisions of the delegation. This connection was further reinforced by the practice of prominent members of the delegation of touring the Territories after every round of negotiations, participating in public meetings where they explained what had just happened in Washington and answered questions concerning the talks. Soon, people began coming to these meetings to complain or to ask for solutions to specific problems in their lives connected to the occupation¹⁰⁶.

‘Arafāt found this relation both troubling and reassuring: troubling because he thought that this popularity could constitute a base for an alternative source of power in the Territories, as explained in the last paragraph. But it was reassuring, he thought, because it exposed the delegation to the popular discontent that would most probably emerge with the increasing duration of the negotiations, but also as a result of the possible difficult concessions that would have to be made to reach an agreement, shielding him and the PLO from direct criticism¹⁰⁷.

The problem with this latter idea was that the opposition in the Territories came not from inside the PLO-based structures or unorganised groups, but rather from Ḥamas and the PIJ, which pursued a radically different approach to the Palestinian resistance movement, and therefore criticised not only the choices of ‘Arafāt and the PLO concerning the Conference, but his whole strategy based on a diplomatic solution.¹⁰⁸

The most clear example of this opposition happened in December 1992: Israel, following several attacks by Ḥamas and the PIJ, arrested and deported more than four hundred Islamist militants, expelling them into south Lebanon. Instead of dispersing into the numerous Diaspora communities, the deportees decided to remain in the area of the

¹⁰⁵ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 156-57.

¹⁰⁶ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 73-74.

¹⁰⁷ Aburish, *Arafat*, 242-43.

¹⁰⁸ Sela, “The PLO at Fifty”, 313-14.

Lebanese-Israeli border, organising themselves and asking for their readmittance into the Territories. The struggle of the exiled Palestinians who resisted in the cold temperatures of mountainous Lebanon soon catalysed the attention of the Palestinians at home, but also of international audiences¹⁰⁹.

At first, the Chairman wanted to use this as an additional card to pressure the USA in Washington, given the upcoming ninth round of negotiations planned for January 1993. But the strong reaction against returning to the negotiating table by the Palestinians in the Territories, the delegation and even the other Arab states forced 'Arafāt to reconsider his decision, and to delay the return to Washington until April. It was this episode that made the PLO leadership understand that its power was seriously at risk, and therefore led it to decide to commit fully to the ongoing Oslo channel¹¹⁰.

The episode of the deportees was the symptom of a long period of marked deterioration of the situation in the Territories, both in the mobilisation of the Intifāda and in the living conditions.

The uprising had undergone a significant evolution from its beginning in 1987-'88: what began as a vast campaign of civil disobedience sustained by and sustaining a compact leadership, represented by the UNLU, and therefore strongly connected to the PLO in Tunis, had achieved its initial objective, namely the re-establishment of the Palestinian Question as a relevant international political issue. But with the start of the negotiations, both with the USA in 1989 and later at the Madrid Conference, and their subsequent lack of results, frustration rapidly replaced the initial enthusiasm¹¹¹.

This frustration was further exacerbated by the employment by the IDF of increasingly lethal tactics. This led, in return, the Intifāda to turn violent, with firefights and gun and bomb attacks becoming more and more common: the Israeli forces, confronted with a threat they were more accustomed to, compared to the initial mass mobilisation, were able to reassert some control in the oPT, although at a cost¹¹². This entailed a weakening of the position of the PLO in the Territories, since Tunis insisted on the need for diplomatic contacts and had renounced armed struggle publicly in December '88.

In addition to this, Tunis was in a persistent funding crisis which lasted since the end of the Gulf War, but in 1992-'93 was unleashing its full effects. Not only was the PLO forced to reduce its expenses in its central and foreign offices, but most importantly, its funding to the Territories. The latter was fundamental for maintaining the structures that 'Arafāt had built in the years that supported the mobilisation, but also those that offered relief to the Palestinians who were victims of the Israeli repression or who had seen their main source

¹⁰⁹ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 425.

¹¹⁰ Aburish, *Arafat*, 249-51.

¹¹¹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 638.

¹¹² "Overall Chronology", 1989.

of income disappear. For example, those who had lost their job, or the families of the prisoners, deportees or killed during the Intifāda¹¹³.

This economic crisis and the consequent slashing of funds directed towards the Territories coincided with the increased utilisation by Israel of measures aimed at depriving the Palestinians of their means of livelihood. For example, the IDF would often order forced closures of all commercial activities in determined areas, including food markets, preventing Palestinians from satisfying their basic needs and depriving them of their revenues from these activities¹¹⁴.

Furthermore, Israeli forces frequently imposed so-called “closed military zones” on villages, cities or whole areas of the oPT, forbidding almost anyone and anything from entering or exiting them, even severing power, telephone and water connections. This further expanded into the practice of sealing off the Territories, banning the Palestinians from leaving them and travelling into Israel, Jordan or Egypt¹¹⁵.

The economic crisis and the expanding violence of the confrontation between the Israeli security forces and Palestinian militants drastically worsened life in the Territories. This resulted in an increased dependence on PLO external aid: but when this diminished and was therefore unable to support the increasing number of people who needed help, the Territories plunged into poverty¹¹⁶.

This sufferance could have possibly be tolerated, if the talks in Washington showed any signs of progress: but with this lacking, Palestinians grew increasingly resentful against the negotiations and the PLO, blaming them for their conditions and even the action of the Israelis: “our public opinion was increasingly turning against the talks, in some ways blaming us [the delegation, Ed.] for the escalation of repression.”¹¹⁷

It therefore became clear to the PLO leadership that the strategy of delaying the negotiations was turning against it, causing it to lose its popularity in favour of the Islamists and even King Ḥusayn. This convinced Tunis of the necessity of finding a compromise regarding the Territories, which at least helped alleviate the difficulties there, as Quray’ noted in 1992:

“A further consideration was the heartbreaking plight of the Palestinian people. The Intifada, the uprising in the occupied Palestinian territories, had already outlived its purpose. [...] Israel’s reprisals against the militants of the Intifada meant death or injury for many Palestinians and the destruction of their homes. Many of the Intifada’s leaders and activists were arrested and detained. The negative effects of this on the economic welfare, the

¹¹³ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 430.

¹¹⁴ Nasrallah, “The First and Second Palestinian *Intifadas*”, 57-58.

¹¹⁵ Nasrallah, “The First and Second Palestinian *Intifadas*”, 58.

¹¹⁶ Aburish, *Arafat*, 231-32.

¹¹⁷ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 221.

education and the health of the Palestinian people began to outweigh the Intifada's benefits."¹¹⁸

Furthermore, when in 1992-'93 the adverse situation in the oPT rose in importance in the eyes of the PLO, pushing it towards the search for a solution, a similar pressure presented itself in the form of a wide alignment of Arab states who wished to see the Palestinian Question resolved, or at least set aside:

"Another important factor was the unusual alliance between the sheikhs of the Gulf, the moderates of Egypt and the radicals of Syria, brought together by the shared experience of the Gulf War. [...] A feeling was growing in all Arab countries that the Palestinian cause had for too long been a banner to be waved by politicians and carried into unrelated battles."¹¹⁹

Ultimately, another factor that convinced the Chairman that 1992 was the necessary moment to begin serious negotiations was the result of the June elections in Israel, won by Labour and its leader, Yitzhak Rabin. Although not the most dovish in the panorama of Israeli politics, his government, especially Foreign Affairs Minister Shimon Peres, had demonstrated its intention of at least committing to the negotiations in good faith¹²⁰.

The question for 'Arafāt was therefore how to conduct this renewed dialogue without losing his power. He still believed in the fact that only direct negotiations with the PLO overseen directly by him could be effective. Therefore, he kept directing the delegation to maintain an uncompromising stance, without engaging the offers of the Israeli delegation, even and especially after the Oslo channel started¹²¹. This caused the first serious frictions between the delegation in Washington and the leadership in Tunis, with the former starting to suspect that secret contacts were starting, and demanding an explanation to 'Arafāt, as was done during a meeting in August '93: "Do you actually want the negotiations to succeed? Are the Washington negotiations a front? Are we buying time for the PLO or do you want them to fail? Do you have back channels that are working?" We asked, but we got no answers."¹²²

If this side of 'Arafāt's diplomatic strategy did not change, after months of talks in Washington in which US officials had rebuffed all requests from the Palestinians to pressure the Israeli team, he was finally convinced that the search for contacts with the USA was useless, and that he had to speak directly to Tel Aviv¹²³.

The Madrid Conference also confirmed the previously held belief of the PLO leadership

¹¹⁸ Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem*, 35.

¹¹⁹ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 427.

¹²⁰ Raffaella A. Del Sarto, "Stuck in the Logic of Oslo", *Middle East Journal* 73, no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 379, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26933085>.

¹²¹ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 88.

¹²² Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 257.

¹²³ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 433.

that only secret diplomacy would grant the negotiators the ability to offer concessions without risking the, eventually violent, reaction of the Palestinian public opinion. ‘Arafāt knew that Israel was in a position of strength and that the PLO would have to relinquish some of its historic claims during the negotiations, but he hoped that the final agreement would outweigh the cost.

But he also knew that to reach this agreement, talks would have to be conducted in secrecy, both to guarantee the above-mentioned ability to make the necessary concessions, but also to protect them from the eventual sabotage attempts of external actors¹²⁴.

These beliefs of ‘Arafāt were shared by the other top members of the PLO leadership, especially by ‘Abbās, who was responsible for the initiation of the Oslo channel:

“We felt that the route to success was likely to be in negotiations through a side channel. In this type of negotiation there would be a minimum of formalities and no taking of minutes so that everyone could talk freely and probe matters without inhibition.”¹²⁵

And:

“Any Palestinian leader who wants to embark on secret negotiations with the Israelis will face violent Arab and Palestinian opposition [...]. The leader or official who attempts such an act needs a unique blend of daring, protection and immunity, without which it is impossible to set forth on such a dangerous path.”¹²⁶

Secrecy was also very convenient for ‘Arafāt, because the necessity of maintaining it allowed him to entrust contacts with the Israelis to a few people loyal to him, as he did with Oslo, and therefore under his total control¹²⁷. It is not surprising, therefore, that when contacts with the Israelis started in London in December ‘92 and then moved to Oslo in ‘93, these were known only by ‘Arafāt, ‘Abbās, ‘Abd Rabbuh, Quray’ and the few who accompanied him during the different rounds in Norway¹²⁸.

With the Oslo channel progressing further than everything else towards an agreement, ‘Arafāt focused all of his attention towards it. The result was that the delegation in Washington was increasingly excluded from the decision regarding the negotiations’ strategy: the Chairman maintained his tight control on the Palestinians at the Conference, insisting on a rigid stance on every matter, even agreeing with the Israelis not to discuss in the official talks anything that was being discussed in Oslo.

In addition to this, with the diminishing importance of the talks in Washington, in comparison to those in Oslo, funding for the Palestinians there dwindled, further

¹²⁴ Nofal, “Yasir Arafat, the Political Player”, 30.

¹²⁵ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 94.

¹²⁶ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 111.

¹²⁷ Stensland, “What Role Did Norway Really Play in The Oslo Process?”, 36.

¹²⁸ Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem*, 3.

enhancing the dependence on 'Arafāt, increasing the factionalism and personalism in the delegation¹²⁹. This was even admitted by 'Abd al-Shāfi, the leader of the official Palestinian delegation: "We are a delegation of fourteen people, right? On the face of it, that seems the situation, but in real terms we are fourteen different delegations. Each of us represents a group and each of us has his contacts."¹³⁰

By the first months of 1993, 'Arafāt had been mostly able to disarm the "threat" coming from the Madrid Conference: Tunis had established a solid mechanism of control on the delegation, and the meetings between the Israelis and the Palestinians showed no signs of advancement. This made it apparent to everyone, above all the USA and Israel, that the diplomacy in Washington was unsuited to reach an agreement, due to its restrictive conditions and especially the exclusion of the PLO¹³¹.

The problem was that in the Territories disillusionment towards diplomacy was starting to rise, after the hoped-for improvement failed to materialise, being replaced by Tel Aviv's increased repression and diminished allocation of resources by the PLO.

Thus, the Chairman was confronted by the serious risk of losing his most important constituency, the oPT, whose support he had used to coerce the rest of the PLO to follow his ideas. Furthermore, the challenge from the oPT did not come from the local leadership nor the PLO internal opposition, the first under 'Arafāt's control and the second marginalised, but from the rising Islamist tide and the resurgence of King Ḥusayn's popularity, both offering a radically different interpretation of the Palestinian identity.

Faced with this eventuality, 'Arafāt decided to abandon his original idea of talking with the US, and directed his attempts at opening side channels directly at the Israelis. Although he faced a relatively more open Israeli government, he knew that Rabin had no sympathy for him and the PLO, and that hard talks were to be expected, also because the Israeli Prime Minister would have preferred continuing the dialogue in Washington, rather than starting a new format with someone he did not trust¹³².

This would mean that important concessions would have to be made to the Israelis if the PLO wanted to have a chance at reaching a deal. This meant that the negotiators would have to be shielded from the scrutiny of the Palestinian public and the attention of the media. The PLO leadership, in fact, believed that both could sabotage what it saw as the last possibility to achieve an agreement that would include it in the future of the Palestinian Territories. Therefore, contacts in Norway were kept under the utmost secrecy, and decisions concerning the side channel were taken by a restricted group of people, bypassing the PLO collective central organs.

¹²⁹ Aburish, *Arafat*, 243.

¹³⁰ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 420.

¹³¹ Wilcox, "A Very Personal Breakthrough", 17-18.

¹³² Aburish, *Arafat*, 247-48.

But, the difficult situation in which the PLO found itself in late 1992 did not necessarily have to lead to the creation of the Oslo channel: it was once again the central position of 'Arafāt that effectively directed his Organisation towards direct secret contacts with the delegates of the Israeli government.

In fact, it was still his own idea of what the diplomatic strategy of the PLO had to be that informed the decisions of everyone beneath him: namely, that any agreement that included the official recognition of the PLO and its role in the Territories by Israel was worth any concession that Tel Aviv demanded¹³³.

And, although many scholars agree that secrecy was a determining factor of the success of the Oslo channel, it can be also said that it allowed the Chairman and those closest to him to conduct the negotiations without any opposition or outside check, not even from those Palestinians in the delegation that had more experience than them concerning the situation in the Territories and dealing with the Israelis.

In conclusion, it was the threat to the structures he built and his basis of power that ultimately led 'Arafāt to search for a contact with Rabin and Peres. These threats were the severe financial crisis that put his neo-patrimonial style of management and his clientelist networks under strain, and the reduced popularity in the Territories, with the consequent rising legitimacy of Ḥamas and the PIJ, and Jordan.

5. Conclusions

The Oslo channel began in London in December 1992, and then continued in the Norwegian capital for the next eight months, concluding on the 13th of September '93 on the White House lawn, with the signing of the *Declaration of Principles*, also known as the Oslo I Accord. This, in turn, led to the establishment of what became known as the Oslo Peace Process, which, during the second half of the 1990s, aimed to resolve the outstanding issues in Palestinian-Israeli relations.

As it was shown in this chapter, numerous factors influenced the PLO leadership in Tunis to initiate or participate in the renewed diplomatic contacts that led initially to the Madrid Conference, and later to privilege the just-mentioned Oslo channel. Firstly, the eruption of the Intifāda in the Palestinian Territories, which offered Tunis the opportunity to re-establish the Palestinian Question as one of the relevant issues on the international stage, especially in a period in which the end of the Cold War was reorienting the priorities of the global and regional actors, especially the USA. This prompted a renewal of the diplomatic activities, first between Washington and local Palestinians, and after 1988, directly with

¹³³ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 80.

the PLO.

Yet, this window of opportunity started to rapidly close due to the worsening shape of the uprising because of the consequences of the Gulf War, during which 'Arafāt had backed Baghdad: this was due, at least in the eyes of his Gulf allies and of the West, to his close relation with Ḥusayn. The political isolation and economic boycott the Palestinians were subjected to after 1990 convinced 'Arafāt to accept the restrictions of the Madrid Conference, among which was the exclusion of the PLO from it.

It was the unacceptable format of these talks that reinforced in the Chairman the belief that the solution for the Palestinian Question could not come from any multilateral forum, including Washington. He therefore kept employing delaying tactics to convince the USA to reopen a direct dialogue with the PLO. However, the deteriorating living conditions of the oPT, the possible uncontrollable evolutions of the Intifāḍa and the continued disinterest of US officials forced 'Arafāt to modify his strategy: presented with the possibility of opening a dialogue with Israelis connected to Foreign Affairs Minister Peres, the Chairman did not waste time and sent his envoys, hoping that this channel would finally lead to the recognition of the PLO and of a role for it in the Territories.

Although the events and the context of the late '80s and early '90s surely influenced the initiation and continuation of the Oslo Process, it can not be denied that it was the determining choices of 'Arafāt that ultimately led the Palestinians to engage with the Israelis.

'Arafāt's conviction that diplomacy was the only and most important way in which the PLO could implant itself in the Territories oriented all of his decisions, from the direction of the uprising to his alignment with Baghdad. Everything was done to achieve a favourable position from which to negotiate, balancing the moderate stance presented to the US in the talks, with the radical statements concerning the escalation of the Intifāḍa and the support for Ḥusayn.

Furthermore, it was the total control 'Arafāt had achieved in 1987, after the season of the internal opposition, that allowed him to govern unopposed every structure of the PLO, both in Tunis and in the Territories. Therefore, it was easy for him to demand loyalty from every Palestinian who would engage the USA and Israel and control the pace of both the mobilisation in the oPT and the negotiations in Washington. Hence, it was the necessity of maintaining his centrality in the Palestinian resistance movement, at a time when this was at risk, that led him to greenlight the contacts with the Israelis in Norway.

All of this was done because of the fundamental assumption of the Chairman's political strategy. 'Arafāt was in fact convinced that if the Israelis, whether by direct negotiations with Tunis or pressured by Washington, recognised a role for the PLO in the Territories, and by consequence in representing the Palestinians, he would be able to negotiate his way to a satisfying final agreement.

This is why he decided to accept Palestinian participation in the Madrid Conference, and in general to negotiate, when the Palestinians were overall in a position of weakness

compared to Israel.

This idea of 'Arafāt is fundamental in understanding his behaviour concerning the Oslo channel, the concessions made during it and its approach to the whole Oslo Peace Process. The following chapter will focus on the analysis of these beliefs and their effects on the Peace Process.

Chapter III

The Oslo Process after three decades

The Oslo Peace Process started in 1993, and although it does not have a formal end date, it can be said that by 2000, with the end of the interim period that had begun in 1994, the failure of the Camp David Summit and the start of the Second Intifāda, it was abandoned, with few, failed attempts to resuscitate it.

The Process has been unable to solve any of the so-called final status issues, and what it has left is an interim authority that soon lost its transitional status to become permanent, at least in everybody's perception, weakened by incomplete territorial jurisdiction and Israeli settlements, among other things.

The reasons why the Oslo Process failed so completely to achieve its objectives are multiple, ranging from the attitudes of internal Israeli politics to the disinterest of the USA and other states. However, to better understand the evolution of the Process, it is interesting to explore the context and policies of the Palestinian leadership, both before the signing of the DoP and after, as well as during the negotiations of all the other Palestinian-Israeli agreements.

The desperate state in which the Palestinians of the Territories found themselves, together with the belief that once implanted in Gaza and the West Bank, the PLO would be able to negotiate its way to a satisfactory conclusion, led 'Arafāt to accept both the DoP in 1993, the Gaza-Jericho Agreement of '94 and the Oslo II Agreement of '95. He believed that the nascent Palestinian Authority would be able to expand, both territorially and functionally, becoming ultimately a Palestinian state.

The problems with this strategy were several and became readily apparent: firstly, the Israelis had no intention of allowing anything more than what they had already conceded. Furthermore, their position on final status issues, especially the Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem, remained rigid and uncompromising.

This soon caused complications in the dialogue between the two sides, which were unable to reach a compromise even on minor matters. The lack of progress soon reignited opposition to the Process, which had subsided after the signing of the DoP.

The dissatisfaction of the Palestinians was also driven by the problems that plagued the interim authority since its inception, mainly corruption and favouritism, and by the constant opposition and propaganda by Hamas and other Islamist factions to the PLO and the Oslo Process.

It was in this complicated situation that 'Arafāt and the PLO leadership had to conduct the talks with Israel. In the meantime, the Chairman tried to balance the various factions and

movements of Palestinian politics to maintain and recreate his position of supremacy in the new Palestinian institutional framework.

Thus, this chapter aims at identifying which choices of the Palestinian leadership before 1993, together with the long-standing trends in the history of the Palestinian resistance movement, led to the evolution of the peace process in the following years.

1. Two/too different perspectives

It was very clear since the beginning of diplomatic contacts with the PLO in 1988 that the Palestinians and the Israelis had very different ideas about what they wanted to achieve. Apart from Shamir's government, whose objective was to arrive at peace agreements with Jordan, Syria and Lebanon while stalling the negotiations with the Palestinians to expand the settlements, all the following Israeli governments, starting from Rabin's, with different degrees of good faith, focused on security and on a detailed definition of the PLO and PA rights and duties.

The Palestinians knew that they were in a weak position, relative to Israel, and would not be able to extract any concessions, especially after the USA showed that they intended to limit their role to that of an impartial mediator. Thus, 'Arafāt's view was that the practical aspect of the discussion did not matter that much, and what was instead important was the recognition of the PLO and its official access to the Palestinian Territories.

This led to two distinct styles of negotiation. The Israelis focused on ensuring that the agreements met their maximalist security needs, insisting that they had to be interpreted to the letter and without variation, while the Palestinians were more inclined to accept vague formulations, with the idea that they would specify them once they had achieved a better diplomatic position.

The result of this difference was that when it came to implementing the different agreements that were reached by the two sides, they inevitably disagreed on what the provisions written in the various texts effectively meant in the field. This led to a vicious circle in which successive rounds of negotiations had to clarify the previous ones, while also advancing the dialogue on the remaining matters, which were, in turn, plagued by implementation problems.

This process of delayed implementation and continuous need for rediscussing previous compromises soon irritated the two parties, both at the level of the delegation and the public opinion, which grew tired with the diminishing effectiveness of diplomacy and started to advocate tougher actions against the other side.

Since the start of the Madrid Conference, the attitude with which Israel approached the diplomatic contacts with the Palestinians was a pragmatic one: its objective was to end the

Intifāḍa and rid itself of the burden of administering the Territories, outsourcing the supply of services, but especially security, to an external entity. The acknowledgement of the right of Israel to exist by the PLO also had mainly a practical implication: it was meant to remove the taboo of the recognition of Tel Aviv, allowing it to use the Palestinian acceptance to ease contacts with other Arab states.

An entity that would provide services to the Palestinians in the Territories and enforce security among them, eliminating threats to Israel before they reached its territory and without risking IDF soldiers, was all that Rabin and those who followed him were ready to concede. Palestinian self-rule, from which were excluded the Israelis in the oPT and the settlements, was meant to rid the Israeli government of the care of the Palestinians, not as a step towards statehood¹.

The PLO, conversely, saw the successive agreements exactly as a step-by-step process aimed at achieving, in the end, a Palestinian state. Therefore, 'Arafāt was less concerned with the details of the texts, as we will see below, and instead focused on the few provisions that he felt would ensure him a better position to reach statehood.

These were the recognition of the Tunis leadership as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinians, and therefore the assurance that Tel Aviv would negotiate only with it, and its legal implantation in the Territories with some form of authority. The reason for this was that the Chairman was convinced that if he was allowed back into the oPT, together with the PLO bureaucracy, he would be able to build and then expand effective structures of government inside the 1967 borders, making a Palestinian state a reality. After that he had done that, he thought that both Israel and the USA could not go back on the concessions they had made, and that they could only acknowledge the reality on the ground and recognise the Palestinians' right to statehood².

In addition to this, 'Arafāt wanted to maintain his position at the head of the Palestinian resistance movement, and reaching a deal with the Israelis was the only way in which he could achieve this. By creating an entity in the Territories headed by him, 'Arafāt would restore his popularity and close ranks in the PLO, reducing the support for Ḥamas and definitely eliminating the possibility of an annexation by Jordan. Furthermore, the Chairman imagined that an agreement would mean that a new influx of international aid would flow into the Territories with which he could revitalise his system of neo-patrimonial distribution of funds and appointments. His priorities thus were a physical return of the PLO leadership in Tunis to the Territories, and the release of funds to be administered by him and his allies.

It is not hard to see then that in the beginning, with the arrival of Rabin and Peres and the opening of the Oslo channel, the policies of the two sides were aligned: both wanted a

¹ Jacques Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat: A Political Diary Behind the Oslo Deal, 1993-1994* (Springer, 2022), 18, 20.

² Ibrahim, "A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy", 120-21.

Palestinian takeover in the Territories and the transfer of authority to a Palestinian self-governing entity, pending the discussions on the final status issues.

Therefore, the direct negotiations of the first half of 1993 proceeded relatively unimpeded: helped by the secrecy granted by the Norwegian, and consequently the absence of external scrutiny, the sides were able to make progress, and by the fifth session, in May, they managed to produce a first draft of what would then become the DoP. Furthermore, in the sixth and seventh sessions, Uri Savir and Joel Singer, both part of the Israeli establishment and considered close to Peres and Rabin, respectively, joined the discussions, signalling to the PLO that Tel Aviv was serious in its intention of reaching an agreement³.

But even in this relatively cordial atmosphere, the different conceptions of what the dialogue meant soon started to emerge, and although the gap between the two delegations was slowly being bridged, it would be this difference that would generate the greatest obstacle in the implementation of the DoP and the following agreements.

Even in Oslo, it was clear how the Israelis wanted to maintain a significant amount of influence concerning the future negotiations and their position of dominance in the Territories. For example, they insisted that the withdrawal of the IDF from the Territories was described as a “redeployment”, implying that this could be reversed in case of need. Furthermore, the area of Jericho, which together with Gaza was to host the first nucleus of the self-governing authority, was not defined, nor was the control of the border crossing points leading to it⁴.

The Palestinians, to the contrary, were able to achieve only the fact that the final status issues were explicitly listed in the DoP (including the status of Jerusalem, the settlements, and the Palestinians refugees), and, more importantly for the Tunis leadership, that the PLO was recognised as a legitimate interlocutor by Israel, allowing it to form the interim authority in the Territories. This was important for ‘Arafāt since it allowed him to return to the oPT and to conduct the peace process exclusively.

The result of this was a text which was surprisingly vague, with a relevant amount of details that still had to be negotiated, a Palestinian self-governing authority which had no clear jurisdiction, and without any indication of what principles should guide the following discussions, apart from a reference to Resolutions 242 and 338. Although this vagueness was an intended solution by both to be able to negotiate more freely later, several provisions favoured Israel: there was no ban on settlement construction, military orders issued by Israeli occupational authorities were to be kept in force, and the new Palestinian interim authority had no jurisdiction over Israelis in the oPT. Furthermore, the DoP stressed the importance of Palestinians being required to guarantee Israeli security, which would

³ Abbas, *Through Secret Channels*, 143-51.

⁴ “Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (Oslo I Accord)”, Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/historictext/9686/declaration-principles-interim-self-government-arrangements-oslo-i-accord>.

become one of the most important parameters with which the PLO's conduct was to be judged⁵.

Although 'Arafāt's negotiatory tactic can partially be blamed for the skewness of the Oslo I agreement, the latter also proved him correct in the fact that only the USA would be able to influence the Israelis and level the diplomatic field, favouring the PLO, which otherwise could be used by Tel Aviv to enforce its conditions on Tunis. This was demonstrated very clearly by the Oslo channel, where the Norwegians were unable to address the evident power disparity between the Israeli and Palestinian positions.

For example, in one of the final moments of the channel, on the 17th of August, a phone call between Tunis, Stockholm (where Peres had stopped for an official visit) and Tel Aviv was organised to solve the remaining issues. The call lasted seven hours, and numerous times Holst, the Norwegian Foreign Affairs Minister, who was in Stockholm sitting next to Peres, told 'Arafāt that the phone call represented the last chance for him to reach an agreement, pressuring him to accept compromises on the area of Jericho, the border crossings and the Israeli military administration⁶.

Having finalised a text which allowed him to return to the Territories, the Chairman was ready to do anything to make Rabin initial and sign it. Thus, when, at the end of August, the Prime Minister demanded that, among other things, the PLO leadership put a definitive end to the Intifāḍa, 'Arafāt accepted, committing to writing a letter to Holst in which he would (for the third time) renounce armed struggle and instruct the Palestinians to stop the mobilisation and return to normal life⁷.

It is not surprising that 'Arafāt agreed to stop the uprising to reach a deal with Rabin: the former's idea had always been that the mobilisation in the Territories was a means to arrive at an agreement, rather than a project to develop autonomously. In the Chairman's mind, everything was subordinated to achieving recognition by Israel and the transfer of power in the Territories: he believed that only in this way could he build a Palestinian state, whether the Israelis wanted it or not.

He said so to 'Ashrāwī: "The Palestinian state will start from Gaza–Jericho and from there I will negotiate with the Israelis to end the occupation in the rest of the Palestinian territories. [...] This will be the beginning of the Palestinian state."⁸

But soon, 'Arafāt had to come to terms with the reality of the facts, namely that the Israelis, and Rabin first among others, had no intention of allowing him any further breathing room

⁵ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 92-98.

⁶ Stensland, "What Role Did Norway Really Play in The Oslo Process?", 44.

⁷ Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem*, 263-64.

⁸ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 259.

to pursue his plans than what was written in the texts, furthermore interpreted following Tel Aviv's point of view, especially concerning the nature of the Palestinian Authority⁹.

The signing of the Oslo I Agreement generated great enthusiasm in the whole of Historic Palestine and worldwide, but when the emotion faded, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators alike realised that the DoP vagueness left huge gaps in implementation that would have to be negotiated, if the Peace Process was to succeed¹⁰.

It is here that the different conceptions of the two sides started to emerge, therefore irremediably widening the gap that had been so arduously bridged by the meetings in Norway.

The first evidence of this emerged already in October 1993, when Rabin and 'Arafāt met in Cairo to discuss the start of the discussion for the implementation of the DoP. The Chairman immediately wanted to discuss the matter of Jerusalem and the settlements, while the Prime Minister insisted that those themes were reserved for the final discussions, and that the scope of the meeting was just to organise the future ones¹¹.

The situation worsened so quickly that after another meeting in December '93 between the two, which was organised to resolve those issues that already presented themselves during the first months, Rabin declared that if he had spoken with 'Arafāt before the signing of the DoP and understood his intentions, probably he would not have signed it¹².

The problem with these negotiations was not so much the fact that the delegations were not able to find compromises on specific issues, since Israel was able to impose its conditions on the PLO without much effort several times, as we will see below. But rather, the fact that 'Arafāt was much more interested in obtaining what he considered to be symbols of sovereignty, for example the fact of being addressed as "President" during the negotiations, the possibility for the PA to issue stamps or passports, or the presence of PA offices in other cities of the oPT even before they were transferred to Palestinian control.

This attention to symbolism was accompanied by a general lack of attention to detail, which Arafāt hoped could be specified later, when, he imagined, he would have better chances to obtain a more favourable outcome. This attitude ran almost totally contrary to the Israeli objectives and style of negotiations: firstly, Tel Aviv wanted to exclude any possibility of the constitution of a Palestinian state in any part of the Territories. Furthermore, they wanted specific guarantees from the PLO in terms of security and the duties of the new Palestinian Authority. Therefore, it cannot be hard to see how these two opposite

⁹ This became increasingly apparent during 1994 and '95, when the agreements concerning the creation and implementation of the Palestinian Authority were negotiated. These were the *Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area* (4th of May '94), the *Agreement on Preparatory Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities Between Israel and the PLO* (29th of August '94), the *Protocol on Further Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities* (27th of August '95) and the *Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip* (28th of September '95, also known as Oslo II or Taba Agreement).

¹⁰ Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat*, 125-26.

¹¹ Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat*, 65-67.

¹² Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat*, 148.

behaviours soon caused the whole Process to stall.

An example of this is the long discussion regarding not the area of Jericho which was to be assigned to the nascent PA (which, anyway, was the subject of heated discussions), but the control of the three bridges that connected this zone to Jordan, and the respective border crossings. 'Arafāt wanted Palestinian officials to be in charge of the security checks: he insisted that upon entering the Palestinian territory, people had to be greeted by a Palestinian official. The Israelis refused, citing security concerns, with Rabin declaring that: "We will not give you control of our borders."¹³ They were worried that the PLO would let people in, mistakenly or willingly, who would then travel to Israel and attack it.

The Palestinians insisted that, other than being a matter of sovereignty, border crossings concerned internal security, and therefore were under the purview of the PA police powers, while the Israelis considered it to be a matter of external security, thus reserved for the IDF. The matter was finally settled when the Israelis conceded that, only for those travelling towards Gaza and Jericho, a Palestinian official would be stationed on the bridges, while an Israeli one would observe behind a one-way mirror¹⁴.

With the discussions continuing during 1993 and '94, another difference of view emerged, strongly connected to the one already mentioned. The PLO saw the negotiations on the transfer of powers as a way to claim its sovereignty, and therefore requested wholesale and wide-spanning transfers in numerous sectors (tourism, environment, land and water management, taxes). Israel, on the other side, still saw itself as the main authority in the Territories, and therefore preferred limited transfers as a way to test the PLO's abilities, fearing (sometimes rightly) that the Palestinians were not ready to manage their new powers¹⁵.

This dynamic emerged with full force after the Gaza-Jericho Agreement of May '94 and led to a marked deterioration in the relationship between the two sides. With his arrival in the Territories in July, 'Arafāt thought that his diplomatic strategy had finally worked and that he would be able to wrestle statehood from Rabin, declaring that: "Soon Palestinian flags will fly on top of every minaret and church."¹⁶

What he had not considered was the fact that Israeli dominance in the Territories and at the diplomatic level was still overwhelming, and that Tel Aviv was determined not only to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state, but also to maintain significant control in the Territories, especially but not only, around the Israeli settlements.

For this reason, the Israelis started to employ tactics aimed at delaying the most significant transfers of competences and the withdrawal, or redeployment as they called it, of the IDF

¹³ Aburish, *Arafat*, 268.

¹⁴ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 117-18.

¹⁵ Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat*, 80, 83.

¹⁶ Aburish, *Arafat*, 261.

from the areas that were to be administered by the PA.

The first was to phase the concessions planned in the different agreements: this not only extended the period under which the Israelis were in control, but also made it easier to suspend or revoke the concessions present in the text with the excuse of Palestinian “failures”. Thus, not only was the whole Peace Process divided into an interim and final phase, with the Israeli continuously postponing matters to the final negotiations, but the whole “redeployment” of the IDF was divided into phases, with usually the last ones further subdivided into ulterior phases¹⁷.

The other tactic was to force the Palestinians to accept compromises on issues where they had already accepted compromises on their original positions. For example, Gaza and Jericho were already limited areas of scarce interest for the Israelis, but despite this, the latter were able, in the case of Jericho, to force the Palestinians to accept the transfer of a roughly 50 square kilometres area, consisting of the city and the surrounding countryside, instead of the whole 360 km² district. Another example is Hebron: the city had an overwhelmingly majority of Palestinians inhabitants, and therefore it should have been ceded to the PA in 1995, but because of the presence of settlers around and in the city, Tel Aviv imposed in 1997 a division of it between a Palestinian- and an Israeli-controlled half¹⁸.

With the discussions dragging through all of 1994 and a good part of '95, the different views of the two sides increasingly reduced their ability to reach acceptable compromises, especially for the Palestinian public. ‘Arafāt tried to improve the situation by asking the USA to intervene, following his long-held diplomatic preferences, but Washington refused, citing the fact that since the PLO and Israel had reached an agreement in Oslo without its help, they should do the same with the following deals and their implementation¹⁹.

This left the Palestinians at the mercy of Israel’s dominating position, which the latter used to impose its vision and needs on the Peace Process and its interpretation of the texts. This led the Palestinians to lose hope in the Process, growing estranged from it.

The result was that, after the Oslo II Agreement and the assassination of Rabin in 1995, there were no more significant diplomatic breakthroughs, with the Hebron Protocol of '97 and the Wye River Memorandum of '98 only complementing the provisions of Oslo II.

It can be argued that the different meanings attributed to the Oslo Process were one of the relevant causes of its failure. The Chairman had always insisted that a political solution with the Israelis was the only way to reach a Palestinian state, and that the compromises that the PLO had to accept were functional to this aim. But when this belief was tested by Israeli attitudes and ideas concerning the negotiations, it rapidly fell apart, and with it any diplomatic progress.

¹⁷ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 115, 131-32.

¹⁸ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 116.

¹⁹ Ibrahim, “A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy”, 134.

The Oslo Peace Process, in fact, was mainly managed by the two respective leaderships, and when these started to doubt each other, the chances of success greatly diminished: the following paragraph will try to analyse this aspect, together with the failure to involve the respective populations, and how this impacted the Process.

2. A leaderships' peace

The beginning of the diplomatic discussions was accompanied by great hopes in the occupied Territories, which increased after the conclusion of the Oslo I Agreement. Palestinians thought that the DoP would soon bring the end of the occupation, and consequently, better living conditions and economic opportunities.

When these advancements failed to materialise, the enthusiasm gradually vanished, being replaced by disillusionment and, increasingly, open opposition to the Peace Process. The latter was not directed only towards the Israeli security forces, but also against the returned PLO leadership, which took charge of the diplomacy, and was therefore seen as partially responsible for its failure.

The reason for this is that the Oslo Peace Process was substantially conducted at the level of elites, with very little participation by, and attention to, the Palestinian population. An indication of this is the fact that the diplomatic contacts with the Israelis were managed almost exclusively by the leaders from the Diaspora, marginalising the “inside” personalities, who were closer to the needs of the Territories. Furthermore, the discussion centred around the institutions and functions of the PA, rather than any attempt to improve the relations between Palestinians and Israelis.

Therefore, when the negotiations collapsed after 1995 due to, among other things, the mistrust between the two leaderships, as illustrated above, there was no popular sentiment able to restart the Process. To the contrary, resentment towards Israel and moderate Palestinians had increased, leading to the definitive abandonment of the Oslo Process.

This paragraph will analyse what factors led to the marginalisation of the “inside” leadership and the scarce consideration of the Palestinian public, and what effect this had on the effectiveness of the Peace Process.

Since its beginnings, the Oslo channel was characterised by direct control from the PLO leadership in Tunis, together with its complete secrecy, apart from the few who were informed by ‘Arafāt and ‘Abbās. This had the intended effect of completely sidelining the delegation at the Madrid Conference, which was composed exclusively of “inside” Palestinians.

The reason for this choice by ‘Arafāt was, as already said in the previous chapter, to maintain control of the discussions and undermine the position of the “inside” delegation.

This exclusion was due, among other factors, to the fact that the interests of the two groups were increasingly drifting apart: while Tunis pushed for its inclusion in the negotiations, often refusing to discuss anything else, Palestinians in Washington were worried by the rapidly decreasing living conditions in the oPT, and tried to obtain a reduction of the Israeli violence against Palestinians.

Although it cannot be said that the Madrid delegation was popularly elected, or even that it had an autonomous popular support, since both its composition and its legitimacy derived from Tunis, indeed, the fact that all of its members came from the Territories meant that they were more aware of the reality of the occupation, and more responsive to the public opinion of local Palestinians²⁰.

This posed a problem to 'Arafāt, whose main objective was to obtain from the Israelis recognition of his and the PLO's leadership position, and thus he did not want to become embroiled in discussions on Israeli violence in the Territories that could prolong, or worse, stall the negotiations of the Oslo channel.

By contrast, the Oslo delegation was composed of PLO politicians who were much more aware of the Organisation's and its Chairman's strategy, and therefore paid more attention to it, rather than the facts on the ground²¹.

Furthermore, the fact that the team in charge of the talks in Norway was composed and directed exclusively by Diaspora Palestinians meant that they had never met a Jewish Israeli, excluding those already involved in the Israeli peace movement. Therefore, they had no experience of the Israelis' way of negotiating, priorities and attitudes, other than the stereotyped image created by years of reciprocal hostility and the brief encounters with the IDF during its military offensives²².

Other than the adherence to 'Arafāt diplomatic strategy, which prioritised PLO recognition, what was determinant was the necessity, felt by the Chairman, to maintain his apical position, and consequently to control more decisively the negotiations. This led to the appointment of those closer to him, who had already proved their loyalty, such as 'Abbās and Qurey', to lead the talks. As a result, the local leadership was penalised due to the fact that, although more skilled and experienced with the Israelis, it was also less controllable, and suspected by Tunis to be tempted to form an alternative leadership that could supplant the PLO.

It is only natural, therefore, that a team composed of Diaspora PLO officials, who had never experienced the occupation, but only the exile, would focus on the return and acceptance of PLO members and structures into the Territories, rather than to immediately improve

²⁰ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 67, 88.

²¹ Wilcox, "A Very Personal Breakthrough", 19.

²² Qurei, *From Oslo to Jerusalem*, 40-41.

the conditions of the oPT, which they thought could be accomplished once they had returned.

Once the initialled version of the DoP was shown to ‘Ashrāwī and the other members of the Madrid delegation, she had this to say: “It’s clear that the ones who initial[l]ed this agreement have not lived under occupation.”²³ Fayṣal al-Ḥusaynī later said: “[Oslo, Ed.] was not peace, just a declaration aimed at achieving peace.”²⁴

The main criticism that was directed at Oslo I was that it failed to address the more egregious Israeli practices in the oPT, since it did not provide for any monitoring mechanism, relying solely on Israel’s goodwill. In fact, ‘Arafāt, with the end of the Intifāḍa, had promised the Israelis a return to tranquillity in the Territories, who could therefore continue their actions unimpeded by Palestinian demonstrations, without the risk of being exposed by any external scrutiny.

This directly impacted several aspects of the occupation that were particularly relevant for the Palestinians in the Territories: for example, the expansion of settlements, the situation of Jerusalem and the violence of the Israeli security forces.

As for the settlements, although Rabin had, in 1992, cancelled the most recent order of new residential units (also because the wave of post-Soviet Jewish immigration had mostly been absorbed), the DoP did not include a ban on new constructions, leaving future Israeli governments to restart at will. It also lacked a clear indication of the boundaries of the existing settlements, which the settlers could therefore expand at the expense of Palestinian lands. Furthermore, any discussion during the negotiations of the other agreements, even tangentially regarding the settlements, was opposed by the Israeli team, claiming that the latter was a matter reserved for final talks.

The condition of Jerusalem was treated similarly: there was no mention of the 1967 Israeli annexation, as well as the ring of Israeli communities aimed at isolating the eastern half of the city from the rest of the West Bank. Again, similarly to the settlements, the mention of Jerusalem as a final issue backfired against the Palestinians, with the Israelis barring any discussion around the status of the city.

Furthermore, there were no guarantees regarding the human rights situation in the Territories, which left free rein to the Israeli security forces to continue their dubious practices such as detentions without trial, deportations, confiscations and demolitions, or outright illegal ones like beatings and extra-judicial killings.²⁵

These aspects were among the most visible in the Territories, and when the initial positive reaction passed, the Palestinians started noticing that not much had changed in their lives.

²³ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 260.

²⁴ Aburish, *Arafat*, 256.

²⁵ Galia Golan, “Peace plans, 1993-2010”, in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 92-93.

Thus, they started to question whether the diplomatic discussions with Israel were actually going to end the occupation.

Other than the scarce attention reserved for the most pressing issues in the Territories, it can be said that the Oslo Peace Process, in general, showed little interest in the opinions not only of the Palestinians but also of the Israelis. In fact, the whole Process was focused on building institutions and increasing cooperation between the two leaderships, while no effort was made to change the respective perception of the two peoples, whose only interactions, apart from a few virtuous exceptions, were irremediably marked by mistrust and violence.

An example of this is the inability or unwillingness of the two teams to reach a compromise regarding confidence-building measures (CBMs) between Palestinians and Israeli citizens, aimed at reducing the atmosphere of suspicion and fostering one of cooperation. The result of this was that with the diminishing effectiveness of the talks, the two populations began accusing each other of negotiating in bad faith and using the discussions instrumentally to further their own goals, rather than to achieve peace. This started a trend, which would intensify in the following years, of transformation of the Palestinian Question, from a political one, based on borders and resources, to an ethnic one²⁶.

A proof of this materialised already on the 25th of February 1994 in Hebron: an armed settler named Baruch Goldstein entered the Ibrahimi Mosque and opened fire, killing twenty-nine Palestinian Muslims. Eleven more would be killed in the following days during clashes with the IDF in Hebron and elsewhere in the oPT²⁷. Conversely, Ḥamas, the PIJ and increasingly Ḥizbullāh (after it secured its position in southern Lebanon) launched frequent attacks both against Israeli security forces and settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, but also inside Israel, especially at critical junctures of the Peace Process²⁸. Particularly unsettling for the Israelis was the new and frequent use by Palestinian Islamists of suicide bomber attacks, which were, until then, a tactic mostly unknown to the Palestinian resistance movement.

The reciprocal violence had the effect, in the eyes of the Palestinians as well as of the Israelis, of reconfirming the pre-conceived beliefs that had been taught to them by decades of oppression and violence. This continued atmosphere of conflict soon started to affect the attitudes of the two leaderships, which, frustrated by the lack of progress, started to be influenced by the radicalism of their respective public opinions. This could be seen, for example, with the election of Likud hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu as Israeli Prime Minister in 1996, which signalled an increased opposition in Israel to a moderate policy

²⁶ Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Menachem Klein, "Oslo: Three Decades Later", *Israel Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2023): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2023.380203>.

²⁷ "Overall Chronology", 1994.

²⁸ Steven L. Spiegel, "The United States, 1993-2010", in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 309-10.

towards the Palestinians and the PLO²⁹.

On the other side, 'Arafāt had to contend with the reality of the situation in the Territories and the reaction of the local Palestinians: the latter were, in the second half of the '90s, at least in principle in favour of the Peace Process, as demonstrated by several polls, but were against the actual agreements that were negotiated and implemented³⁰.

This forced the Chairman to balance two contradictory tendencies: the renewed assurances demanded by the international actors and the Israeli government, especially after '96, and the increased expectations of the Palestinian public, who, after his return to the Territories, wanted a rapid end to the occupation³¹.

He did so by continuing to uphold the provisions of the agreements he already signed, especially those in the Oslo II treaty, but outwardly he employed an increasingly radical rhetoric, sometimes even implicitly supporting the Palestinian attacks. This was aimed at placating the growing opposition directed at him, especially by the Islamists and the PLO opposition, and at cementing his support in the Territories.

This strategy seemed to work at first: in 1996, in the first elections for the PA President, 'Arafāt was elected with overwhelming support, receiving a confirmation of his mandate to negotiate with the Israelis. But this duplicity, in the eyes of the Israeli, US and European officials, appeared instead as a sign of unreliability, further complicating the negotiations³². But the renewed support for the Chairman did not last long, and with it the trust in a positive outcome of the Peace Process. The scarce results of the talks after 1995, the still evident superiority of the Israelis, both politically and on the ground, which allowed them to impose their priorities on the PA, and the difficulties with the latter's institution-building and corruption, definitely alienated a large part of the Palestinians, not only in the Territories but everywhere.

This happened because 'Arafāt had promised or fed the hopes of the different Palestinian constituencies, which, in hindsight, were unrealistic. In the Territories, people imagined that with the return of the PLO, the aims of the Intifāda would be realised: when, after years, and the birth of the Palestinian Authority, not only Palestinian statehood, but even a complete withdrawal of the IDF or an improvement of the economic situation were not reached, the Palestinians turned against 'Arafāt and his leadership³³.

In addition, the Diaspora was disappointed by the lack of any significant measures for the return of the refugees, but also by the progressive loss of relevance of the PLO structures relative to the PA ones³⁴. Furthermore, Arab states, after the DoP, started to engage

²⁹ "Overall Chronology", 1996.

³⁰ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 138.

³¹ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 283.

³² Spiegel, "The United States, 1993-2010", 315.

³³ Aburish, *Arafat*, 288-89.

³⁴ Parsons, "The Palestine Liberation Organization", 220.

seriously in peace or recognition talks with Israel, sidelining the Palestinian cause. The prime example of this is Jordan, which signed a peace agreement with Tel Aviv in 1994. Finally, the Palestinians of Israel, who had been one of the first channels for contacts between the PLO and Israeli officials, were completely overlooked in every agreement, and became increasingly separated by the Palestinians in the Territories, with their demands ignored by both Israeli and PA politics³⁵.

As was seen in this paragraph, the Oslo Peace Process was substantially a dialogue between the two elites, with little participation from the respective populations. Furthermore, not much attention was directed at addressing the most immediate needs of the Palestinian people in the Territories, nor to the creation of a mechanism with which Israelis and Palestinians could develop trust in each other, therefore sustaining the peace discussions. Thus, it is interesting to note that, although the Territories and the local leadership had risen to prominence with the Intifāda and helped 'Arafāt accomplish his strategy of diplomatic contacts during the late '80s and early '90s, they were, nevertheless, not able to influence the Peace Process more deeply, nor was their population involved.

The reason for this can be found in the structures of power that 'Arafāt had built and wanted to maintain inside the PLO, which inevitably privileged him and those most loyal to him, who were usually Palestinians from the Diaspora, while PLO members from the oPT were usually kept at lower levels in the Organisation's structures. This led to a scarce level of influence on the policy-making in Tunis, with the consequences that we have illustrated above.

But is also true that support from the Palestinians in the Territories had always been one of 'Arafāt's most important sources of legitimacy, and became even more so after the signing of the DoP and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. This meant that when the disagreements between the two negotiating teams became evident, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, and Israel started to apply pressure thanks to its dominating position, the Chairman could not ignore the opposition coming from the Territories to the deals he had negotiated.

This opposition, which was exploited by the Islamists, led 'Arafāt to adopt harsher positions, which further complicated the negotiations, which in turn widened the gap in trust of the two sides. Therefore, when the talks stalled in 1996 and later collapsed, there was no popular support to sustain the Peace Process, being replaced by increased suspicion and violence between Palestinians and Israelis.

The situation in the Territories thus remained critical for the success of the Oslo Process, and the exclusion of their population and leaders did nothing else than reducing the chances of success. Their radical return to the forefront materialised in the form of armed struggle, which was demonstrated most clearly by the explosion of the Second Intifāda in

³⁵ Arik Rudnitzky, "The Evolution of Narratives on the Oslo Process among Palestinian-Arab Political Elites in Israel", *Israel Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2023): 94-96, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2023.380207>.

2000.

The situation could have been improved if the Palestinian Authority's institution-building process had been successful in creating working and efficient state structures. But this was not the case, as we will see in the next paragraph.

3. Institutions: all the flaws, none of the advantages

One of the central issues of the discussions was the creation and development of Palestinian institutions to regulate matters transferred from the Israeli authorities.

For 'Arafāt, these institutions were particularly important for numerous reasons: firstly, they were meant to be the start of that development that would lead to building a Palestinian state, and therefore they represented a symbol of the newly acquired position of the PLO in the Territories.

But these bureaucratic structures were also useful in maintaining the central position the Chairman had achieved inside the PLO and to confirm it in the newly established Palestinian Authority. In fact, his control of the negotiations allowed 'Arafāt to fill key positions in the PA with former PLO and Fath officials loyal to him and tied to the leadership by clientelist relations.

Furthermore, Tunis hoped that the expanded responsibilities transferred by Israel would mean an increased influx of funds with which to alleviate the crisis gripping the oPT, increasing the support for the Authority.

Also, those involved in the Peace Process, especially international actors, imagined that a Palestinian government would be accepted by the local Palestinians, and that it would be able to better manage the Territories. They hoped that, under international supervision, the PA would be able to align with the liberal democratic and market economy standards, which were, in those years, gathering increasing relevance in international politics.

Conversely, for the Israelis, the new Palestinian entity was supposed to free Tel Aviv from the cost and the responsibilities of providing services, and more importantly, assume the duty of enforcing security in the oPT. Thus, the Israeli team highlighted the importance of building strong security apparatuses, while democratic and human rights standards were marginalised.

The result of this process eventually disappointed the desires of all those involved in the talks: the PA was a corrupt and inefficient entity, which recurrently underperformed both in terms of security, service provision and human rights. The Palestinians soon realised that the government that was supposed to lead them to statehood not only was not able to do that, for the reasons shown previously, but was corrupt and could be as violent as the Israeli one.

The difficulties of Palestinian institutions were the result of long trends in Palestinian politics that originated long before the signing of the DoP, and that contributed to the failure of the Peace Process.

The PLO had started to organise formal structures in the oPT already in the early '80s, as we have already illustrated, mainly as a response to the loss of its territorial base in Lebanon.

The problem with this network of associations and organisations was that they were mainly directed at mobilising the Palestinians in favour of the PLO and against the Israeli authorities, and secondly to provide services and distribute patronage to ensure the support of the oPT, contrasting the alternative projects of Jordan and Israel.

Their scope, therefore, was not that of being autonomous bodies of political elaboration, nor to have any policy-making abilities, but rather to be simple executors of Tunis's indications.

The reasons for this were numerous and derived from the history and the internal power relations of the Palestinian resistance movement, but one of the more relevant is tied to the concept of *ṣumūd*. The term, which can be translated as "steadfastness", indicated a strategy employed by the Palestinians in the Territories after 1967, which was aimed at resisting the new occupational authority, both passively and later actively³⁶.

Among the different practices, one of the most important was non-cooperation with the Israeli military government, but also non-participation in any Israeli-directed institutions, such as the police or tribunals. This practically meant that Palestinians had to abstain from every aspect of public political life, since any attempt to establish a party, newspaper, or recognised union would mean interacting with Israeli laws or regulations, legitimising them, at least from the Palestinians' point of view³⁷.

On top of this, so-called *ṣumūd* funds started to flow into the Territories after 1973, aiming to support the resistance and the disobedience campaign of local Palestinians. The management of these funds soon became another arena of the Palestinian-Jordanian struggle for influence, contributing to the already present neo-patrimonialism of Palestinian politics³⁸.

The result of this was that the Territories became a constituency whose support was to be assured by the provision of subsidies and services, and where political activity was reduced to the realisation of strategies imagined elsewhere, whether in Tunis or Amman. This meant that the formulation of alternative models for the oPT did not come from local Palestinians, who were seen as mere recipients both of aid and ideas hailing from outside. Thus, the PLO structures in the oPT were directed much more towards mobilising the

³⁶ "Sumud: Steadfastness as Everyday Resistance", Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/33633/sumud>.

³⁷ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 465-66.

³⁸ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 479-81.

Palestinians when it was deemed necessary by the “outside” leadership, rather than articulating political proposals or modifying the social structures imposed by the occupational authorities.

The cause of this approach to political activity in the oPT resides in the PLO position of exclusive representative of the Palestinians on the global stage, and the high priority that ‘Arafāt attributed to this role. But, because, since its creation, the PLO was mainly composed of exiled refugees, it is only natural that the leadership saw the “outside” as the *locus* for policy decisions, while the Territories were tasked with on-the-ground mobilisation.

Therefore, when, after Oslo, the PLO leadership started to build structures aimed at managing the powers transferred by the Israeli authorities, it imported those that still existed, having survived, although weakened, the evacuation from Beirut.

The problem was that this also meant maintaining, and in some cases reinforcing, the negative aspects of these bureaucratic para-statal institutions. In fact, after the loss of Lebanon, the function of providing services was abandoned, becoming little more than personal feuds, characterised by widespread clientelist networks employed for distributing patronage.

These structures’ hierarchical nature and the fact that they were used by the leadership as a tool for ensuring loyalty and support often meant that, rather than pursuing practical objectives, they became a tool for control, reinforcing the personalist and majoritarian management of the PLO by ‘Arafāt.

Thus, when ‘Arafāt began to organise the bodies of the nascent Palestinian Authority, he implanted into the Territories those that he had created and, especially, tested in the previous years. This served two aims: firstly, it allowed the Chairman to maintain his power and reproduce it in the new Palestinian entity. Secondly, the new positions were meant to reward both leaders and simple militants for their loyalty and support. Conversely, the role of local Palestinians was limited to middle-level positions or that of technical advisors, excluding them from any policy-making process³⁹.

But the PA agencies were not only meant to satisfy old allies and to control the new phase of Palestinian politics. ‘Arafāt believed that if he was able to present himself as the responsible head of a statal apparatus, international actors would finally unlock the aid they had promised for the Territories. With these funds, he hoped to improve the economic situation and create new opportunities both for local Palestinians and also for that class of enriched Diaspora businessmen with connections in the Gulf and Arab countries⁴⁰.

The result of this systematic reproduction inside the PA of the existing model of institution building and management of the PLO caused numerous problems.

³⁹ Nigel Parsons, “The Palestinian Authority”, in *The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Joel Peters and David Newman (Routledge, 2013), 229-30.

⁴⁰ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 531.

First of all, the widespread and enduring problem of corruption. The interaction between the neo-patrimonial relations endemic in the PLO structures and the influx of money that was supposed to be directed towards the development of projects, concerning the transferred powers to the PA, created an environment ripe for illicit deals between the newly nominated Palestinian officials and businessmen of different origins⁴¹.

Chief among the latter was the class of Palestinian entrepreneurs who accumulated capital thanks to their contacts in the Gulf and rose to prominence during the long stay of the PLO headquarters in Beirut. These people used their proximity to several high-ranking Palestinian officials to obtain contracts to provide goods or services to the PA agencies, often embezzling funds. Furthermore, they soon became the intermediaries of Israeli companies that wanted to enter the Palestinian market, participating in the latter's profits⁴².

This led to a lack of improvement in the Territories' economic situation, but also in the PA's economic performance. In turn, this meant that 'Arafāt became increasingly dependent on international aid, making him more vulnerable to Israeli and US conditions, causing further contrasts in the negotiations, in a moment in which the Chairman was trying to expand the competences of the Authority to reinforce its claim to statehood.

Another problem originating from the previous PLO politics was the position of unquestionable authority of 'Arafāt, which he replicated in his government of the Territories. This meant that he not only assumed the office of PA President, thereby nominating the members of the executive and other important posts, but he also appointed himself to the most crucial ones.

An example of this is the management of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), which was the supposedly independent body responsible for controlling the allocation of foreign aid. To neutralise a possible check on his power, 'Arafāt occupied the post of chairman, causing the protests and later resignation of PECDAR's director, which had the only effect of enhancing the former's control on aid distribution⁴³.

Furthermore, after 1996, conflicts started to arise between 'Arafāt, now elected President of the PA, and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). The reason for this was that although the President had far-reaching powers, both by law and practically, the PLC still maintained some independent prerogatives. Even though Fath̄ members occupied the majority of seats, the PLC still tried to check the power of the President, resulting in 'Arafāt using his control of the media and the magistrature to block any serious criticism of his

⁴¹ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 159.

⁴² Aburish, *Arafat*, 275, 290.

⁴³ Aburish, *Arafat*, 279.

decisions⁴⁴.

Even his own ministers, whom Arafāt could appoint and dismiss at his will, were often nominated to appease and reward different interest groups, rather than to act as expert advisors in their fields. In fact, the President would often act without consulting them, or alternatively, enforce constant oversight over their decisions⁴⁵.

The poor economic and democratic performance of the PA disappointed the Palestinians, but since it could be blamed on several factors, including the inflexibility and obstructionism of Israel, it did not cause excessive criticism towards the leadership, being instead more of an obstacle in the relationship with Israel and the USA. What really enraged the Palestinians was the nature of the new Palestinian security forces and their management of the situation in the Territories.

The issue of who would assume security responsibility for the Territories when the IDF would have been withdrawn had always been a central one since the first meetings in Norway. Israel insisted that any Palestinian entity that would originate from the Process had to have amongst its first priorities the prevention of threats coming from the Territories towards either the Israeli territory and citizens, including the settlers, who, in any case, were going to be protected by the IDF.

Furthermore, they wanted the new Palestinian security apparatus to be overwhelmingly composed of Diaspora Palestinians, since Tel Aviv did not trust the “inside” Palestinians, fearing that they could sympathise with more radical militants, or even worse, that Islamist and Leftist opponents could infiltrate it and gain access to training and weapons.

This latter requirement did not represent a particular problem for ‘Arafāt. In the second half of the ‘80s, in fact, he had enlarged and centralised under his control the military wing of the PLO, mainly to strengthen another base of loyalty⁴⁶.

Therefore, when the Israeli team asked him to create a strong police force as one of the first institutions of the new Palestinian entity, the Chairman simply transformed units from the Palestinian National Liberation Army (PNLA) into several thousand members of the new Palestinian police, which entered the Palestinian Territories with him in May 1994.⁴⁷

Israeli security concerns remained a constant of the Oslo Peace Process, and the newly-established Palestinian Security Services (PSS) rapidly expanded with the different deals during 1994 and ‘95, creating different civil and paramilitary branches, swelling to tens of thousands of members in 1996⁴⁸.

The problem with this extensive network of security agencies was that rather than being

⁴⁴ Parsons, “The Palestinian Authority”, 227-29.

⁴⁵ Aburish, *Arafat*, 278.

⁴⁶ Aburish, *Arafat*, 280-81.

⁴⁷ Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat*, 208.

⁴⁸ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 121.

created to protect the Palestinians, it was seen by Israel as a proxy for its own safety, and by the PLO leadership as a tool to control Palestinian public opinion and target internal opposition.

In fact, Israeli citizens were not subjected to Palestinian jurisdiction following dispositions of the Gaza-Jericho and Oslo II Agreements, and therefore, the PA's authorities were virtually helpless to stop any action of either the IDF or the settlers. In addition to this, Tel Aviv and Washington would continually judge the PA's and 'Arafat's "good behaviour" based mostly on the prevention of Palestinian attacks towards Israeli targets⁴⁹.

The result was that soon Palestinians started to perceive their own national security forces as a substitute for the Israeli ones, rather than agencies which were supposed to protect them. Arguably, it can be said that the different branches of the PSS substituted the IDF, but that the interests that were protected did not vary, with the responsibilities of the occupation now partially shouldered by the Palestinian Authority⁵⁰.

By consequence, this is what the PSS started to do: equipped and funded by Western aid, PA policemen started to detain and also beat mainly Ḥamas and PIJ militants, but also any other perceived opponent to the Peace Process, often without charges or due process.

For example, in February 1995, just before the Rabin-'Arafāt meeting at the Erez/Bayt Ḥānūn border crossing, Palestinian police detained forty-five Islamists, later formalising the arrest for twelve of them⁵¹.

Furthermore, 'Arafāt soon started to use agencies within the PSS, especially the Preventive Security Services, which was mainly composed of Faṭḥ members, to target not only perceived threats to the Peace Process, but any opposition to his position at the head of the PA, whether real or imagined.

Especially after 1996, with a more active PLC debating criticism of the conduct of the PA government and the development of a more independent media environment, PSS agencies were increasingly used to silence or censor non-aligned personalities. An instance of this was the arrest in May '97 of Dāwd Kuttāb, a journalist who was the director of an independent news channel that broadcasted the live session of the PLC, which often included vigorous debates, often critic towards the leadership. After his arrest, the PLC failed to obtain his release, further humiliating the assembly⁵².

With time, the security chiefs became one of the most important pillars of 'Arafāt's power, often achieving great influence, being able to control the functioning of other PA bodies and building their own personal networks of resource extraction and clients.

⁴⁹ Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 282.

⁵⁰ Stensland, "What Role Did Norway Really Play in The Oslo Process?", 43.

⁵¹ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 529.

⁵² Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 163.

The Palestinian Authority was supposed to be, in 'Arafāt's plans, the stepping stone to a full-fledged Palestinian state. At the same time, it was meant as a way to implant the PLO in the Territories, both ensuring its role as representative of the Palestinians, but also to reward the loyalty of members with new offices and positions.

But as was stated above, the Israelis had no intention of allowing a Palestinian state to emerge. They therefore kept obstructing the development of the PA, using Tel Aviv's dominance to carve exemptions and retain key aspects of the Territories' life. Furthermore, Palestinian negotiators' requests to transfer more extensive competencies were systematically denied, citing poor performance by those already transferred. This was due to both actual internal shortcomings but also to the lack of Israeli cooperation, which further weakened the Palestinian diplomatic position.

Therefore, the choice to implant into the Palestinian Territories the already established structures of power that Arafāt had built in Fath and the PLO was surely due to his desire to maintain his position atop the new bureaucratic structures of the PA, but also, partially, as a reaction to this denial by the Israelis.

This was because, since the Chairman's state-building project was faltering, he had to rely on the already established neo-patrimonial mechanisms of loyalty and support gathering, which often followed the return of the PLO members from the Diaspora.

This empowered established interest groups that soon became determinant in Palestinian politics, namely the connected businessmen and the security chiefs, to the exclusion of the local leadership. This led to a steep increase in corruption and declining economic performance, which made the leadership ever-dependent on foreign aid, which in turn made it more subject to Israeli demands of increased security, which, in a vicious circle, reinforced the securitarian drift.

It can be argued that the Israelis were not particularly opposed to this tendency: one of the few sectors in which cooperation between the two sides was actually increasing was that of security, where cordial meetings were frequent and often productive⁵³.

The consequence of all of this was an increasing opposition not only to the single agreements, but to the overall Peace Process and, more worryingly for him, to the figure of 'Arafāt. The tougher stance he would sometimes assume in the negotiations was not enough to balance the increasingly authoritarian evolution of his government, nor to diminish the increasing popularity of his Islamist and Leftist opponents.

Palestinians were disappointed by what now resembled just another autocratic Arab regime, which they saw as a result of the Oslo Peace Process, especially of Israeli rigidity and Western indifference. It was this disappointment, and the consequent opposition, that combined with other factors, some already mentioned, that led to the downfall of the Oslo Peace Process

⁵³ Neriah, *Between Rabin and Arafat*, 87.

4. A growing opposition

'Arafāt had always seen the Oslo Peace Process not only as a way to reach his goals using diplomacy, but also to maintain and possibly grow his popularity and the support for his leadership.

He wanted to ensure better conditions for the two most important constituencies crucial for his position, namely the Palestinians of the Territories, who bestowed him the legitimacy to lead the movement, and the members of Fath and PLO bureaucracy, who instead granted him control. For this reason, the attention of the Palestinian leadership was directed at improving the situation of the West Bank and Gaza, while also establishing the Palestinian Authority as a continuation of the PLO.

But as it has already been shown above, various factors contributed to the failure of this project, and when after 1995, the Palestinians realised the Tel Aviv had no intention of allowing them to fulfil their aspirations, and that the Palestinian Authority was unable to achieve the hoped-for improvement of their economic or human rights situation, they began to criticise the idea of a political solution in itself, instead supporting those groups that still violently opposed both Israel, and the new PA security forces.

Although 'Arafāt still maintained his hold on the Palestinian resistance movement and the prestige it derived from his prominent position, it is also true that both the Islamists, as well as other radical militias loosely tied to the traditional Palestinian parties, started to gain approval as well as militants.

Even though the position of the Chairman/President was never directly contested, the structure of the Peace Process, with its division between an interim and a final phase, made it easy for opponents to the agreements on both sides to sabotage it, undermining the already fragile trust between the two sides.

This led to significant evolution that would shape the future of the Palestinian Question and of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict. First of all, the inability to reach a deal concerning the final status issues, which resulted in an aborted Peace Process that left the Palestinian Authority stuck in its transitory phase, having to settle on the existing situation, which meant dealing with the unrestrained superiority of Israel and its still present security forces in the PA's territory.

Secondly, the progressive loss of relevance of the PLO, which was replaced in its "statist" aspect by the new Palestinian Authority. At the same time, his confrontational role was undermined by the rise of radical militant groups. These could be autonomous or connected to established parties, inspired by Palestinian nationalism or political Islam, and would become the protagonists of the new phase of armed struggle against the Israelis.

The aim of this paragraph, therefore, is to illustrate the development of the internal Palestinian politics in the second half of the '90s, showing how this contributed to the

definitive failure of the diplomatic talks and the transition to a new phase of the Palestinian resistance movement.

The traditional opposition groups inside the PLO had reacted in different ways to the announcement of the Madrid Conference before, and the Oslo Peace Process then. The Communists and FIDA decided to side with the Chairman, while the PFLP and DFLP criticised the unilateral decisions of the leadership.

This led to the latter's exclusion from all the policy-making processes concerning the Peace Process. In reaction to this, the two Fronts decided to form an alliance with the more radical PLO factions (PPSF, aş-Şā'iqa, PLF, Faḥ al-Intifāda and others) but also with the PIJ and Ḥamas. The alliance met in Damascus, being dubbed the "Damascus Ten", and was meant mainly to oppose the negotiations, rejecting both Madrid and the DoP, once it was announced⁵⁴.

Having failed to influence PLO policies, since the boycott of the Central Council meeting of October '93 had the only effect of allowing 'Arafāt free rein in determining the implementation of the DoP, the Damascus Ten decided to formalise their bloc, creating the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF). This marked the highest moment of collaboration between Palestinian leftist-radical nationalist forces and the Islamist ones. Their common opposition to the PLO leadership, in fact, was not enough to address the significant differences regarding the future of Palestinian politics.

While the Popular and Democratic Front saw the APF as a counterbalance to 'Arafāt's personalistic leadership and the PLO Right, but still valued the participation in the Organisation, the Islamists and the other nationalist radicals showed little regard for it, with especially Ḥamas and the PIJ aiming to rebuild a totally different Palestinian identity. This led to an increasing separation between the two currents of the Palestinian opposition: while the Islamists expanded their criticism of 'Arafāt and the PLO, the traditional Left slowly returned to established Palestinian institutions, hoping to recover some of its previous influence. But, although critical, the PFLP and DFLP (now reunited in the Unified Leadership) search for an agreement with Faḥ and the Palestinian Authority leaders unavoidably led them to compromise with 'Arafāt and to enter his clientelist and authoritarian power management system⁵⁵.

The inclusion of all the main parties that animated the UNLU during the Intifāda into the Oslo system had the effect of subjecting all the voices critic towards the shortcomings of the leadership to the same system, which censored criticism and rewarded loyalty. This greatly reinforced Faḥ, which, being the President's party, was the most loyal, and conversely reduced the credibility of the others, especially the Unified Leadership, whose attacks now seemed empty, since it had fully integrated into the Palestinian Authority.

This left, in the Palestinian perception, only the PIJ and, even more, Ḥamas as a credible

⁵⁴ "Overall Chronology", 1992, 1993.

⁵⁵ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 156, 158-62, 171.

alternative to an entity that was seen increasingly as an accomplice of Israel, rather than a Palestinian government.

Therefore, the legitimate objections to the provisions of the various agreements and their practical implementation found less and less space in institutional Palestinian politics, being instead intercepted by radical actors outside the PLO. This was one of the factors that led to the slow transformation of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict from a struggle about land, borders, human rights and international law to one based on identity, religion and ethnicity.

Another factor that resulted in the decline in the importance of the PLO resided in the relationship between this and the Palestinian Authority.

One of the main reasons why 'Arafāt commenced the Oslo back channel and later signed the DoP was that it assured the recognition of the PLO and of its future role in any negotiations concerning the fate of the occupied Territories. This recognition was of the utmost importance, in a moment in which the Organisation was isolated politically and in the middle of a debilitating financial crisis⁵⁶.

But, once 'Arafāt assumed the role of PA President, in addition to that of PLO Chairman, and started to construct the foundations of the new entity, he realised that the former allowed him greater autonomy, compared to the already important one he had in Tunis. The presidentialist structure of the PA granted him not only the role of head of state, but also that of head of government and of the security forces, together with sweeping powers in the legislative and judicial spheres.

Comparing it to the office he occupied in Tunis, the one in Ramallah (the seat of the PA government) was unencumbered by those collective bodies, the PNC, Central Council and Executive Committee, whose consent 'Arafāt still had to formally obtain before being allowed to launch his policies as PLO Chairman. Furthermore, the Peace Process had not solved the PLO funding problem, since aid was directed to the PA and was bound to be used in the Territories⁵⁷.

Able to centralise more power and with a greater availability of funds, 'Arafāt started to prioritise the PA *vis-à-vis* the PLO, often wielding his power as President to impose decisions on PLO central organs, for example, by convening them simultaneously to PA executive meetings. This was helped by the fact that many top officials had equivalent roles in both structures at the same time, after being coopted by 'Arafāt after 1994.

In addition to that, even tasks that were reserved for the Organisation in Tunis were subsumed by the Palestinian Authority bodies. The most relevant example of this is the direction of the discussions during the Peace Process, which had always been the duty of the PLO negotiations unit, but which were gradually transferred to personnel in

⁵⁶ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 660.

⁵⁷ Aburish, *Arafat*, 276, 312-13.

Ramallah⁵⁸.

Instead of reinforcing the PLO, the Oslo Process led to its legitimacy being weakened, being increasingly identified with Ramallah. This was because, before the start of the final negotiations, which only began in the late '90s, the discussions were centred on the interim phase, and therefore on the Authority's powers and responsibilities. Furthermore, the fact that the great majority of the Tunis personnel was absorbed into the new post-Oslo structures meant that these officials often maintained their previous functions in the PLO but prioritised their new and better-paid jobs. This further intertwined the two entities, with a growing influence of the PA, since unruly sections of the PLO were often sidelined by reducing allocations to them and assigning their duties to PA offices⁵⁹.

In conclusion, this resulted in a fragmentation of the Palestinian resistance movement between a PA/PLO pole involved in the Peace Process and increasingly split into personalistic factions, and a violent opposition that gained its legitimacy from armed struggle against the Israelis, while Israeli and Diaspora Palestinians saw their space of representation rapidly decreasing due to the weakening of the PLO.

This made the negotiations more difficult on the Palestinian side, since 'Arafāt had to manage the different currents while trying to maintain his position, forcing him to sometimes concede to the radicals, at least in rhetoric, while also advancing in the discussions with the Western countries and Israel.

The combination of the increased identification of the PLO with the PA and its policies, and the absence of any institutional opposition to the latter, failed to provide an outlet for criticism of the agreements and the continuing Israeli violence in the Territories.

Furthermore, the transfer to all major Palestinian-inhabited city centres in Gaza and the West Bank to PA control stripped their population of the possibility to organise another Intifāda-style campaign. The disappearance of the IDF and the occupational authorities, and their replacement by Palestinian ones, reduced the advantages of civil disobedience and non-violent demonstrations, which were ineffective in the absence of an open military authority⁶⁰.

This led the Palestinians to rally behind Hamas and the PIJ, which had moderated their original claim to the whole of Historic Palestine during the years of the Intifāda to appeal to a larger number of Palestinians, but had nevertheless maintained their total opposition to the Oslo Peace Process.

The newfound support for the Islamists allowed them to grant legitimacy to their armed struggle campaign, which targeted Israelis, both in Israel and in the settlements, but also the security forces of Tel Aviv, as well as those of the PA.

⁵⁸ Parsons, "The Palestine Liberation Organization", 216-19.

⁵⁹ Parsons, "The Palestine Liberation Organization", 218-20.

⁶⁰ Khatib, *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process*, 152.

This was a particularly problematic aspect of the whole approach to the negotiations: the presence of an initial transitory phase, which was supposed to function as a test and enhance trust between the two sides, was instead exploited by extremists on both sides to convince the respective public opinions that the “others” were not truly interested in peace. Consequently, Islamists, radical Zionist and Israeli security forces became engaged in an escalating number of attacks, which often were justified with the previous action of the other side, in a vicious self-amplifying loop⁶¹.

The increasing mistrust of Palestinians and Israelis towards both the Process and each other soon affected the attitudes of the two leadership, who started reflecting the uncompromising demands of their constituencies. This particularly hurt the negotiations, because they were based on the premise that the two sides trusted the goodwill of each other.

In fact, it can be said that the initial “success” of 1993 and '94 was due in large part to the understanding, however fragile, between ‘Arafāt and Rabin. Their needs in those years complemented one another, and although the two had very different ideas regarding the eventual conclusions of the Peace Process, they managed to reach an understanding that allowed them to reach several compromises that kick-started the negotiations⁶².

But during 1995, the difficulties that emerged in the practical matters in the talks caused this relationship to deteriorate. The fact that ‘Arafāt was much more dependent on Rabin to achieve any of his objectives, which were thus obtained only through costly concessions, sparked anger in the Palestinians⁶³.

We will never know how the relationship between the two leaders would have further evolved, since in November 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was killed by a right-wing extremist. He was replaced by Shimon Peres, who was considered a “dove” in Israeli politics, but the escalating violence penalised Labour, which in the May '96 elections was replaced by Netanyahu's Likud.

With the Israeli right's conquest of the office of Prime Minister, the diplomatic contacts between Tel Aviv and Ramallah rapidly declined, amidst increasingly hostile acts by both the extremist wings of the two camps, but also by the two governments.

Israeli authorities, in fact, officially sanctioned the resumption of settlement building in the territories they still administered. At the end of the '90s, a hundred thousand more settlers had moved to the Territories compared to 1993, when the Oslo Process started⁶⁴.

But above this creeping advance of the settlers, Tel Aviv also sanctioned more sensational actions to affirm its beliefs. For example, in September 1996, the Netanyahu government

⁶¹ Del Sarto and Klein, “Oslo”, 4.

⁶² Spiegel, “The United States, 1993-2010”, 314-15.

⁶³ Aburish, *Arafat*, 266.

⁶⁴ Del Sarto and Klein, “Oslo”, 4.

sanctioned the opening of a tunnel in the Old City of Jerusalem running in the area of the Temple Mount/Haram ash-Sharīf reserved for Jewish worshippers. The act was seen as a way to assert Israeli (and Jewish) control in a delicate area of high symbolic values for both Israelis and Palestinians. The resulting clashes between the two sides, which for the first time saw PSS forces opening fire on Israeli security forces, caused eighty-six Palestinian and fifteen Israeli deaths⁶⁵.

From 1996 to 2000, Netanyahu and ‘Arafāt were locked in a clash of wills, aiming to validate their radical credential with their home constituencies. As a result, the negotiations reached a standstill, with few and not really significant advancements in 1997 and ‘98.

Israel, apart from the transfer of Hebron and of some territory from area C to area B and A, kept delaying the redeployment of the IDF out of the territory of the Palestinian Authority, claiming that Ramallah was not doing enough to prevent the acts of violence by Palestinian armed groups. At the same time, Israel continued expanding the settlements’ boundaries and built-up area, justifying this by saying that since borders and settlements were final status issues, the Palestinians could not make requests for a moratorium on their expansion⁶⁶.

The hostile Israeli government and highly unfavourable power balance added to the fact that ‘Arafāt’s strategy had lost a great deal of support with the Palestinians. Although his figure was never directly under question, given his symbolic importance for the Palestinians, as the 1996 elections confirmed, his management of the PA surely was. The failures in the Peace Process, the inefficiency and corruption of the PA government, and the weakening of the PLO caused disappointment in the Palestinian public⁶⁷.

His reaction was twofold: on the one side, he increased the repression of internal opponents through an expansion of the security services, hoping also to maintain his standing with Western governments, which required him to curb what they saw as “terrorism”⁶⁸.

But he also tried to rebuild his base of support through a more radical rhetoric, by turning a blind eye to some Islamist activities, and escalating his demands to Israel. ‘Arafāt hoped that by abandoning his moderate posture, he would be able to diminish the support to Hāmas, therefore forcing it to align with the PA, and also to regain control of the many armed groups loosely tied to PLO parties, including Fath, that until that moment had sided with the Islamists, opposing the Peace Process⁶⁹.

This ambivalent attitude allowed him to regain some support from the Palestinians, but irritated the international partners, who grew tired of what in their eyes was ‘Arafāt’s

⁶⁵ “Overall Chronology”, 1996.

⁶⁶ Golan, “Peace plans, 1993-2010”, 93.

⁶⁷ Leopardi, *The Palestinian Left and Its Decline*, 190.

⁶⁸ Aburish, *Arafat*, 288-89.

⁶⁹ Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 508.

inconsistency. It was this attitude that caused, among other things, the failure of the Camp David Summit and the behaviour of the PA and its security forces during the Second Intifāda.

During the First Intifāda, it was the support for a political solution by the Palestinians in the Territories that decisively helped ‘Arafāt to overcome the PLO internal opposition to his policy of diplomatic contacts with the US, and later to continue to participate in the Madrid Conference, as well as the Oslo channel.

The local support for the Chairman was, in fact, one of the key factors in his command of the Palestinian resistance movement, alongside the absolute control of the PLO. Thus, when in the second half of the '90s it became clear to the “inside” Palestinians that their hopes concerning the Oslo Peace Process were going to be disappointed, and that Israel could use its overwhelming superiority to coerce their leadership, helped by Tel Aviv’s Western allies, ‘Arafāt could not ignore their anger. This sentiment was fuelling the ever-increasing militancy and violent actions of Islamists and other groups outside of the PLO, who could easily frame their armed struggle as a response to Israeli egregious actions concerning the settlements, but also in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Territories.

‘Arafāt, therefore, was at the centre of several conflicting interests that he had to satisfy if he wanted to maintain his power and position at the top of PA and Palestinian politics. Beyond popular resentment towards Israel, the new PA/old PLO bureaucracy asked for more funds to maintain its clientelist networks. At the same time, Israel demanded an expansion of the PSS and its more widespread use against radicals, and the international actors made the allocation of aid conditional on increased efficiency and reduced corruption of Palestinian institutions.

The result was, for outside observers, an apparently contradictory conduct by the PA President. Repression against internal opponents, both armed and peaceful, alternated with periods of leniency and alignment with the more extreme diplomatic requests of militant groups. Attempts to establish independent authorities were thwarted by successive actions that practically annulled their supposed autonomy. The explanation for this, which failed to be grasped by outside actors, was that ‘Arafāt was trying to maintain his position of dominance in Palestinian politics by attempting to appease his traditional constituencies, the PLO members and Territories Palestinians, while also satisfying Israel and the West, the approval of whom he needed to succeed in his diplomatic strategy.

These contradictions exploded at the Camp David Summit of 2000, where ‘Arafāt was confronted by a comprehensive proposal to solve all final status issues, which he refused, hoping to enhance his radical standing, to then use his increased popularity to negotiate in a better position.

But this plan was upset by the violent burst of the Second Intifāda in the same year, which led to the return of the IDF to Palestinian Authority territories and a full-on confrontation with those radical groups that ‘Arafāt had tried to contain. In response to this, the PA

President tried to replicate his balancing act between the violence of the Palestinians and the faltering diplomacy, but with even scarcer results than previously, stuck between the mutually exclusive Palestinian and Israeli intransigence.

5. Conclusions

'Arafāt's was convinced that once he achieved the recognition of the PLO by Israel and that Tel Aviv was engaged in talks, he would be able to reach Palestinian statehood. This was the central belief of his policy-making in the years after 1987, and also the promise that he used to make acceptable to the Palestinians the concessions he had offered to the Israelis to advance in the Process.

But this vision was plagued by several shortcomings, which fatally impacted the success of the Oslo Process. As explained above, fundamental differences between Palestinians and Israelis in the significance of the diplomatic talks, the corrupted and autocratic institutions that constituted the PA government and the scarce engagement of local Palestinians with the new entity, as well as few measures to modify the relationship with the Israelis, generated profound disappointment and aversion towards the Peace Process. Even though it is true that the different agreements were deeply flawed and unbalanced, it is also true that these shortcomings were not accidental mistakes, but the result of years-long trends of Palestinian politics, often tied to 'Arafāt's style of government. His constant attempts to maintain absolute power inside the PLO and the wider resistance movement often translated into the disempowerment of other figures or groups, and in a system that relied on loyalty, rather than competence, to advance through the ranks.

This further enhanced the relevance of 'Arafāt's ideas, since criticising them meant being marginalised, which called for diplomatic contacts aimed at recognising the role of the PLO and a return to the oPT, as a necessary and sufficient stepping stone towards a Palestinian State.

Furthermore, 'Arafāt's mistrust of autonomous intermediate bodies, which could formulate alternatives to his already established strategy, meant that the Palestinian resistance movement was stripped of the possibility to develop alternative frameworks to continue its struggle, based on the militants' experience and therefore possibly more fitting to the international and regional context of the late '80s and '90s.

Therefore, instead of using it as an opportunity to break with the old PLO system, the construction of the Palestinian Authority structures was used to replicate it and reinforce 'Arafāt's position, now expanded with the title of President of the Palestinian Authority and of the State of Palestine.

The problem was that when this system clashed with the more powerful Israeli government and its priorities, all of the former's contradictions came to the surface, placing 'Arafāt at the centre of pressures coming from groups with opposing interests, that he himself had helped to create and whose influence he had contributed to crystallise. This started a downward spiral in which diminishing advancements in the negotiations led to increased tensions within the PA, which resulted in more difficulties in the Palestinian position at the talks.

In addition to this, the scarce diplomatic results and the continued hostile Israeli actions increased the legitimacy of groups, like Ḥamas and the PIJ, who advocated both for a total rejection of appeasement with the Israelis, but also a completely different conception of the Palestinian identity.

Stuck between these contrasting pushes resulting from his own policies, 'Arafāt found himself exactly in the position he tried to avoid: dependent on an openly hostile Israel, with a paralysed PLO and an inefficient PA, and with an increasingly valid alternative to his leadership.

If his attempt to satisfy all of these currents at the same time by alternatively pleasing them helped him maintain his position, it surely did not help the Peace Process, which was by then marred by mistrust and by the Western and Israeli perception that 'Arafāt was an unreliable interlocutor, more interested in his survival than in reaching a final agreement.

After 2000 and the violence of the Second Intifāḍa, all attempts to revive the Oslo Process invariably failed. The death of 'Arafāt in 2004 and the Faṭḥ-Ḥamas split of 2006, and later clashes in 2007, sealed the impossibility of its resumption, since no other Palestinian figure had the prestige necessary to conclude a deal, while the division of Palestinian, as well as of PA territory, prevented the rise of a new legitimate interlocutor that could engage in talks with the Israelis.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed at identifying what factors determined the choice of the Palestinian leadership to participate in the Oslo negotiations.

What has emerged is that the reverberations of the First Intifāḍa and the Gulf War profoundly impacted the diplomatic possibilities of the PLO, respectively improving and worsening it. In fact, the Intifāḍa helped to re-establish the Palestinian Question as a relevant topic of international politics, while the ambiguity of the Chairman during the invasion of Kuwait caused his political isolation and the financial crisis of the PLO.

The latter element compelled 'Arafāt to accept the unfavourable conditions of the Madrid Conference. To escape the latter and reduce the perceived threats coming from the delegation, which could possibly form an alternative leadership, and the Territories, where the Islamists were quickly gaining popularity, Tunis decided to seek direct contacts with the Israelis, aiming to bypass the negotiations in Washington. It was this that inspired the choice of agreeing to meet Israeli intellectuals in London in December 1992, marking the beginning of what would become the Oslo channel.

But these events were not happening in a vacuum, but interacted with ongoing processes of Palestinian internal politics. Since the end of the '70s, 'Arafāt had started to prioritise the search for a political solution, with the consequent renewal of diplomatic activities. This corresponded to a renewed importance of the militancy in the oPT, at the expense of activities abroad and notably of the armed struggle, especially after the loss of Lebanon, the last territorial base from which the PLO could attack Israel.

Furthermore, in the same period, the Organisation underwent a process of statalisation, during which bureaucratic structures increasingly replaced the previous collective and party-based bodies. This also caused a centralisation of power in the leadership, especially in the Chairman, who started to distribute patronage in order to maintain loyalty. These changes led to changes in the internal politics of the PLO, shifting from consensus to majority rule for policy-making decisions, and with legitimacy deriving from popularity and loyalty, rather than armed actions.

Therefore, when the Intifāḍa started, 'Arafāt quickly decided to use it to advance his diplomatic strategy. Similarly, since the consequences of the Gulf War directly hit one of the sources of his power, his neo-patrimonial network, he had few choices but to acquiesce to US and Israeli demands concerning the Madrid Conference.

Similarly, the need to maintain the position of prominence in the Palestinian resistance movement led 'Arafāt to bypass his own delegation to reach an agreement with the Israelis that could confirm his role and improve the conditions in the Palestinian Territories, where the threat of Islamists and radical nationalists was growing.

Other than being a reason for the beginning of the Oslo channel, these trends also influenced the Peace Process in its entirety, notably during the second half of the '90s.

The attachment to the diplomatic objective by 'Arafāt, which aimed at the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, to be obtained with incremental agreements with the Israelis, soon clashed with the latter's uncompromising attitude and focus on security. Furthermore, the scarce involvement of local Palestinians was a result of the PLO leadership's unilateralism of the late '80s and '90s, while PA institutions reflected the corruption and autocratic methods that plagued their PLO predecessors.

All of this had relevant consequences for the chances of success of the Oslo Peace Process, which, among other problems, was also opposed by a growing number of Palestinians, also due to the problems just mentioned. In fact, it can be said that by 1995 the discussion became substantially fruitless, and after 2000 the Process was definitely dead.

It can therefore be seen how the PLO leadership was engaged in a continuous effort to adapt its strategic decisions to the evolving context of the post-Beirut phase.

This shows how the Palestinians were not merely the subjects of Israeli or Western actions, suffering the consequences without reacting, nor were they simply a source of legitimacy to be spent in internal Arab politics to gain power and support on a national or regional stage. The development of an indigenous Palestinian resistance movement, in fact, allowed the leaders of this movement to chart their own path, often acting independently or even contrary to the wishes of other Arab leaders. This was also what prompted the recognition by other Arab capitals of the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, later influencing other states and international organisations to do the same.

It is also undeniable that a relevant part of both the strategic decisions and the adaptations to the events came from the PLO leadership, and more specifically from its Chairman, Yāsir 'Arafāt.

This was due to a series of reasons: no one, inside or outside the PLO, had the same level of popularity or legitimacy to represent the Palestinian people other than him. He could boast his past as a *fidā'iyy*, as well as his connection with Arab elites in the Gulf and the, at least in public, respect of other Arab leaders.

Secondly, he based his politics on a broad nationalist programme, sidelining the more revolutionary projects of other Palestinian factions, therefore appealing to a larger number of Palestinians.

This centrality of 'Arafāt had some positive and significant influences on the whole Palestinian resistance movement: in fact, if this could develop as an autonomous actor of regional and international politics, this could in part be attributed to the Chairman insistence on the importance of PLO independence, especially from other Arab states that would have gladly used the Palestinians' struggle to further their own political objectives instead.

Furthermore, he understood before others that Israel was backed by powerful allies and

was therefore too strong to be defeated militarily, and that a return to the pre-1948 situation was impossible, even with the help of other Arab armies. Consequently, already in the early 1970s, Arafāt started to pursue a diplomatic strategy aimed at achieving a political solution for a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders.

Even his military accumulation between 1978 and '82 in Lebanon was aimed at obtaining credibility with the USA, rather than in preparation for real military action against Israeli territory.

His consistent commitment to Palestinian independence and the search for a political solution allowed him to gradually but consistently reduce the influence of other Arab actors and their armed proxies inside the PLO, while he expanded the support for and normalised the idea of a negotiated settlement with the Israelis.

In this sense, one can see how much the figure of 'Arafāt was pivotal in the conclusion of the Oslo I Agreement and in the beginning of the subsequent Peace Process.

But, although he undoubtedly had several positive influences on Palestinian politics, 'Arafāt's leadership also had some shortcomings, which were extensively illustrated in the thesis, and that inevitably had repercussions on the PLO and the Oslo Process.

His central position within the Palestinian resistance movement meant that 'Arafāt spent as much time trying to move closer to his objective as he did maintaining his power. This was accompanied by an emphasis on trust and loyalty rather than competence in his relationship with his subordinates and colleagues, and a not always correct reading of the international political situation.

This led to the numerous flaws that were illustrated several times in the course of the chapters of this thesis, and that materialised in the decisions that the PLO leadership took between the late '80s and early '90s, when the prospect of a diplomatic opening presented itself as a result of the First Intifāda.

It can be argued, in fact, that the most damaging trait of 'Arafāt's style of management was his total disregard for opinions and policies different from his, having relevant impacts at several defining moments in Palestinian politics. For example, his decision to utilise the Palestinian mobilisation during the uprising only to further the diplomatic strategy, rather than follow the advice of other Diaspora and local leaders to intensify the struggle, or the stalling of the negotiations against the wish of the delegation in Madrid, who tried to achieve advances in the talks, and finally 'Arafāt's choice of signing the DoP although many in the leadership and in the Territories had serious reservation about the contents of the Agreement.

This scarce consideration for ideas that strayed from 'Arafāt's plan for the achievement of a Palestinian state, both in terms of final aims but also practices, was what ultimately led to his acceptance of a severely unbalanced compromise with an Israel in a much stronger position.

It is also true that 'Arafāt was immersed in a deeply complex and sometime hostile environment, that often forced him to take difficult decision to maintain Palestinian autonomy and achieve Palestinian statehood.

The struggle for an independent Palestinian state, whether in the whole of Historic Palestine or just within the Green Line, was not only the desire of almost the totality of the Palestinians, both in the Diaspora and in the Territories, but also the only conceivable possibility by almost every political figure in the Arab world.

The necessity of Arab peoples to have their own independent states was, in fact, the mainstream idea of almost all Arab anti-colonial or post-colonial political thoughts, from the pan-Arabist republics to the moderate Gulf kingdoms. The path to development and freedom from colonialist ties was conceived only through the creation of a strong state apparatus that could uplift the local populations.

Under this framework, the struggle of the Palestinians against Israel was understood as a struggle of an oppressed people against a colonial project, and therefore the only way in which 'Arafāt and the other PLO leaders could imagine victory was through the establishment of a Palestinian state.

This 'Arafātist nationalist project was intentionally devoid of any radical social claim inspired by socialist or communist traditions. This was due to several reasons: first of all, as said above, it aimed to gather the maximum amount of support from all the groups of Palestinian society, some of which could be intimidated by revolutionary ideals. Secondly, the PLO leadership had seen the consequences of attempting to introduce radical reforms in the states where it was hosted during the years: in Jordan, it had caused a civil war and the expulsion of the leadership, while in Lebanon it led to a much longer and bloodier civil war, two Israeli and a Syrian invasion and, similarly, the expulsion of the PLO towards Tunis.

The relationship with the other Arab states and leaders was indeed a delicate one. The PLO had to balance the need to maintain their support while also assuring the autonomy of Palestinian action. Numerous times, powerful Arab states, especially Syria, Libya and Iraq, had tried to use the Palestinians to further their bids to lead the Arab world, using different Palestinian factions as proxies. It can be argued that 'Arafāt perceived the necessity to control and centralise power inside the Palestinian resistance movement was partially a reaction to these attempts.

In conclusion, although it is true that the decision to conclude the Oslo I Agreement was surely driven by the need to maintain a system of power that saw 'Arafāt at its centre, it is also true that for many, this system was the only one that would maintain a united Palestinian movement, guaranteeing the possibility of one day gaining an independent Palestinian state, rather than remaining a fractured population of refugees living in camps and subjected to the ambitions of Arab leaders.

By the early '90s, in fact, the PLO leadership had few choices to avoid this latter scenario: with the restructuring of the international order after the end of the Cold War, the

substantial end of support by Arab states, who wanted to sideline the Palestinian Question and exploit the economic opportunities that the US and Israel had to offer, Oslo represented the only way in which 'Arafāt hoped to be able to achieve his aims.

The Oslo Peace Process, at least in the perception of Western public opinion, is seen as the last significant missed opportunity to solve one of the most intractable and relevant questions of the twentieth century.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the problems that plagued almost all the agreements that were concluded during eight years of negotiations derived from deep-rooted aspects of Palestinian politics, rather than accidental features of the singular deals.

Furthermore, this thesis was focused on the Palestinian side, but it is arguable that Israel and the international actors, especially the USA, share at least the same amount of responsibility in the failure of the Peace Process. The uncompromising obstructionism of Tel Aviv concerning Palestinian self-determination and its insistence on continuing illegal and hostile practices, such as settlement expansion and dubious "security" operations, matched with Washington's disinterest, which translated into partiality in favour of Israel, sealed the fate of any peaceful solution.

To work, the Oslo Peace Process would have needed to be intrinsically different. To even have a chance to work, an agreement would have needed clear provisions regarding the rights and responsibilities of the two sides, strong international monitoring and reporting systems, attention to the needs, reconciliation and aspirations of the two peoples, inclusion and cooperation of other regional states, and measures aimed at correcting the power imbalance between the two sides. An agreement like this would have been substantially different from the one that was signed in 1993, so much so that it would have been incomparable.

The aim of this thesis was thus not to demonstrate the futility of any attempt to reach a deal, nor attribute blame regarding the failure of the Peace Process, but rather to study which were the conditions and intentions that led the Palestinians to participate in it, in the hope that a better understanding of these will help in the imagination of better ways to approach the issues of the Palestinian Question.

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