

August 2, 1983

## **THE PLO'S GROWING LATIN AMERICAN BASE**

### INTRODUCTION

At one time, the Monroe Doctrine shielded Latin America from interference by nations outside the Western Hemisphere. In recent decades, however, the Doctrine has been violated so repeatedly that in effect it has been repealed. The Soviet Union has established a garrison in Cuba, while Eastern bloc states have joined Moscow in creating a base of operations in Nicaragua and Grenada.

Yet another external force is escalating its interference in this Hemisphere--the terrorist Palestine Liberation Organization. The PLO works closely with Nicaragua's radical Sandinista regime and is helping those who are trying to overthrow El Salvador's democratically elected government. At camps in Cuba and the Middle East, the PLO trains cadres of terrorists, which head back to Latin America to undermine established regimes. While the PLO is not the cause of Latin America's most basic problems, it is exploiting them. In turn, the PLO increasingly uses its growing Latin American base to reinforce its international terrorist campaign against the United States and Israel.

### FORGING PLO-CUBAN-SOVIET LINKS

Since its establishment by the Arab League in 1964, the PLO has grown from an irredentist militia into what has been described as "a multinational business corporation, with an amalgam of terrorism and diplomacy as its end product."<sup>1</sup> Its original objective was the destruction of Israel and its replacement by a "secular democratic state." In broader terms, the PLO has been conducting a two-pronged offensive against what it calls "American

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Dobson and Ronald Payne, The Terrorists: Their Weapons, Leaders and Tactics (New York: Facts on File, 1982), p. 90.

imperialism, Western colonialism, and world Zionism." One prong is a political campaign against Israel and its allies--the U.S. in particular--waged in every international forum since the late 1960s. The second prong is a transnational terrorist network to attack the allies and supporters of Israel and the United States.

In both cases, the PLO's objective has been to impose upon international, regional, and civil conflicts the anti-Jewish and anti-American rubric of its own hostilities. In this, the PLO has found in Latin America particularly fertile ground. Latin American support was decisive when the United Nations sponsored establishment of Israel in 1947;<sup>2</sup> and from 1947 to 1972, Latin American nations provided more than half of the United Nations votes in support of Israel.

The PLO's penetration of Latin American nationalist and democratic movements has been gradual. It made its international debut, in fact, in Cuba at the 1966 First Conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAL). As a result of contacts established there, PLO-Cuban cooperation began on a limited and individual basis. In 1968, for instance, Cuban intelligence and military personnel assisted the PLO in North Africa and Iraq. In 1969, PLO and Cuban officers were jointly trained in the Soviet Union. That June they were dispatched to Egypt to raid Israeli outposts in the Sinai desert.

The prospects for more extensive coordination were restricted until 1968 by the Soviet policy of courting legally constituted Arab governments. This policy demanded studied nonrecognition of the PLO. By 1969, however, Moscow apparently decided that the PLO was a useful vehicle for Soviet policy, not only in the Middle East, but elsewhere in the Third World. The Soviets launched an extensive public relations campaign on behalf of the PLO and Al Fatah (Conquest), a group led by Yassir Arafat that assumed control of the PLO that year. Extensive, favorable press coverage was given by Soviet publications to the "Palestinian cause." PLO representatives met with Soviet public organizations, such as the Soviet Women's Association, the World Peace Council, and the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee.

Moscow's semiofficial support was matched by weapons and materiel delivered indirectly through Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. A May 1972 meeting in Algeria between Fidel Castro and PLO leaders cemented the PLO-Cuban axis and led to joint PLO-Cuban training of Latin American guerrillas with specialized instruction in Lebanon, South Yemen, and Libya.

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1947 the U.N. vote partitioning Palestine was 33 in favor, 13 against, and 10 abstentions. Latin American countries voted as follows: 13 in favor, 1 against, and 6 abstentions. See George Tomah, ed., United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1943-1974 (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1974), pp. 4-14.

After Soviet military personnel were expelled from Egypt in July 1972, Moscow significantly increased its support of the PLO. In September 1972, the Soviets made their first direct arms shipment to the PLO; this included a number of SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles.

The final stumbling block to full PLO-Cuban cooperation was Cuba's diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel. Under tremendous economic and political pressure from the Soviet Union, Havana announced at the 1973 Algiers Nonaligned Conference that it no longer recognized Israel. The following year, Cuba provided facilities for the PLO's first Latin American office. Offices since have been established by the PLO in Nicaragua, Panama, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Guyana, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, though not all have been granted diplomatic status.

#### THE PLO'S LATIN AMERICAN AGENDA

Once firmly allied with Cuba and the Soviet Union, the PLO mounted an international diplomatic offensive using the United Nations as its base.<sup>3</sup> In 1974, the PLO won U.N. observer status through Resolution 3237. The Latin American votes were 3 in favor (Brazil, Peru, Venezuela), 3 against (Bolivia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua) and 8 abstentions.<sup>4</sup> The PLO's diplomatic campaign was facilitated by the Arab League's financial support and by OPEC's willingness to trade price and supply concessions for Latin American recognition of the PLO.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, subversive activities continued. The PLO established logistical links with radicals of every kind in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Mexico, and, most important, in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Yassir Arafat boasted to reporters in April 1981 that the PLO has "connections with all revolutionary movements throughout the world, in Salvador, in Nicaragua--and I reiterate Salvador--and elsewhere in the world."

#### Consolidation and Expansion: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras

In the mid-1970s, the PLO targeted Nicaragua's Somoza regime for destruction. Nicaragua had long been a major anti-Marxist bastion, assisting American efforts to destabilize the Marxist Arbenz regime in Guatemala, and providing a staging ground for the Bay of Pigs invasion of the Cuban mainland.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Juliana Pilon, "The U.N. Campaign against Israel," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 271, June 16, 1983; and, "The PLO's Conquest of the U.N.," Midstream, Vol. 25 November 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See Regina Sharif, "Latin America and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," The Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. VII, No. 1 (Autumn 1977).

<sup>5</sup> See "Radical Arab States Take Aim at Latin America," U.S. News and World Report, September 1, 1980, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Belden Bell, "The PLO is at Work Subverting Latin America," Human Events, November 25, 1978, p. 19.



Nicaragua had a long record as a friend of Israel, even supplying arms and materiel to Jewish forces fighting Arab attacks prior to the establishment of Israel. Nicaragua also purchased arms supplies on the world market on behalf of Israel. This debt was partially repaid years later when Israel stepped into the breach created by the Carter Administration's arms embargo against Nicaragua.

Early covert contacts between the PLO and Nicaraguan rebel forces began in 1969 when Sandinista leaders Pedro Arauz Palacios, Tomas Borge (now the Sandinista Minister of the Interior), and Eduardo Contreras were given PLO training in Lebanon. Later that year, joint Cuban-PLO training of Sandinistas was begun in Lebanon, Algeria, and Libya. Tomas Borge was a major link in funneling Libyan money and PLO technical assistance into Nicaragua, and he arranged shipments of arms from North Korea and Vietnam into Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.

PLO-Sandinista links became public on February 5, 1978, when Benito Escobar, of the Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua (FSLN), and Issam Sli of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, issued a joint communiqué from Mexico City. The communiqué spoke of the "bonds of solidarity which exist between two revolutionary organizations," and condemned American "imperialism" and Israeli "Zionism."

Immediately after taking power in July 1979, the Sandinista regime signed what was called a government-to-government agreement with the PLO, allowing it to open an "embassy" in Managua with a staff of seventy.

Since then, the PLO has been active in Nicaragua. For one thing, the PLO presumably had a hand in the Sandinista policies which drove the entire Jewish community of Nicaragua into exile. For another thing, intelligence sources confirm that of the thirteen camps on the Nicaraguan northwest coast for training revolutionaries from El Salvador and elsewhere, at least three are run by the PLO. A U.S. State and Defense Department joint backgrounder on Central America reports that up to fifty Libyan and PLO advisers have been active in Nicaragua, servicing equipment and training and arming guerrillas.

The PLO has loaned the Sandinista regime over \$12 million, Libya has given it \$100 million in aid (and is considering a \$300 million investment in agricultural projects), and Algeria has shipped Nicaragua more than thirty Soviet-made tanks and large quantities of arms.

Miguel Bolanos Hunter, a high-ranking Sandinista who defected to the United States this spring, reveals that "The PLO and the Libyans have headquarters in Nicaragua. It is easier to have a base in Nicaragua to work in the Western Hemisphere against Israel...Nicaragua has become today the new Cuba...Nicaragua has

become the base of operations for the spread of international communism in the Western Hemisphere...."<sup>7</sup>

The immediate goal of the PLO and its allies apparently is to amalgamate the "revolutionary struggles" of Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. El Salvador is the immediate cynosure of PLO efforts.<sup>8</sup> PLO ties with Salvadoran guerrillas are particularly intimate. The leader of the Salvadoran Communist Party, Shafik Handal, is the son of Palestinian emigres from the Gaza strip and has visited Beirut regularly since March 1981 as a guest of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP),<sup>9</sup> a part of the PLO. Handal's party is an important constituent of the five-member Farabundo Marti--a coalition of rebel forces in El Salvador forged by Cuba. Stated Acting Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs John Bushnell in testimony to Congress: "There has been a massive influx of arms from Soviet and other communist sources [into El Salvador]. Radical Arab states and the PLO and the terrorist PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine] have furnished funds, arms and training."

### Brazil

Though Nicaragua and El Salvador are currently the focus of its efforts, the PLO remains active elsewhere in Latin America. Since 1979, the PLO has had a formal representative in Brazil. The Arab League is pressuring Brazil to permit the opening of an official PLO office in the capital by playing on Brazil's high oil dependency (85 percent of its oil is imported) and its need for Arab export markets.

The PLO meanwhile is working through the Arab League Office in Brasilia, mainly to provoke anti-Semitic hostility against Brazil's 160,000 Jews. In Brazil, as in other major Latin American countries, the PLO benefits from the Arab League's campaign to "raise the ethnic and national consciousness" of the indigenous Arab population. An estimated 9 million to 15 million of the 342 million Latin Americans are of Middle East extraction. Of them, 5 million are in Brazil, and 2 million are in Argentina. By contrast, there are about 600,000 to 700,000 Jews in Latin America, half of them in Argentina, 150,000 in Brazil, 50,000 in Uruguay, and 40,000 in Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> Interview by The Washington Post of Miguel Bolanos Hunter at The Heritage Foundation, p. 36 of transcript.

<sup>8</sup> For extensive analysis of PLO presence in El Salvador, see U.S. Department of State Special Report No. 80, "Communist Interference in El Salvador," February 23, 1981; Max Singer, "Can El Salvador Be Saved?" Commentary, December 1981; Richard Araujo, "The Nicaraguan Connection: A Threat to Central America," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 168, February 24, 1982; and W. Bruce Weinrod, "El Salvador: What's Next?" Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 261, April 18, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this relationship, see Juan M. Vasquez, "Salvadoran Rebels: An Uneasy Coalition," Los Angeles Times, March 24, 1982, pp. 1 and 14.

The PLO now has established logistic and financial ties with the Brazilian Vanguarda Popular Revolucionaria, a terrorist organization established by the Brazilian Communist Party to overthrow Brazil's government. The VPR has received training in PLO camps in Lebanon. Major Brazilian dailies, including Sao Paulo's O Estado de Sao Paulo and Jornal de Tarde and Brasilia's La Opinion reported in 1979 that Al Fatah and the PFLP were working clandestinely in Brazil to train young people to promote internal revolution and join Palestinian guerrillas against Israel.

#### The Southern Cone--Argentina, Chile, Uruguay

In February 1974, the Junta de Coordinacion Revolucionaria (JCR) was established to coordinate guerrilla activities in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Bolivia.<sup>10</sup> The founding fathers included representatives from Chile's Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), Argentina's Peoples Revolutionary Army (ERP), Bolivia's National Liberation Army (ELN), and Uruguay's Tupamaros. The JCR reportedly has links with Cuba, the PLO, and Libya.

Al Fatah and the PFLP for three years have been using camps in Cuba and Lebanon to train members of the Chilean Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR). Established in 1965 by radical leftists, it has conducted guerrilla warfare all over Latin America since 1969. During President Salvador Allende's reign (1970-1973), the MIR operated openly in Chile with full government support; they now work clandestinely, relying on PLO and Western European terrorist group's support.

Since 1972, the PLO has maintained logistic ties with the Argentinian Peronist-Marxist Movimiento Peronista Montonero, which claimed responsibility for the June 1970 murder of Pedro Eugenio Aramburo, the former President of Argentina.

In 1978, according to the British Economist Foreign Report, the PLO and the Montoneros announced the formation of a tactical alliance to attack Israeli and Argentinian targets.<sup>11</sup> The Foreign Report noted that "The ideological base for this kind of tactical alliance is readily comprehensible because many of the Montoneros' key leaders (like Rodolfo Galimberti) are revolutionary Peronists who began their political careers in ultra-nationalistic and violently anti-semitic organizations such as Tacuara."<sup>12</sup>

#### The Andean Pact Countries--Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Columbia

Peru permitted the PLO to open an "information office" in 1979. The PLO representative in Peru, Issam Besseiso, now has working contacts with the Student Federation and various opposition

---

<sup>10</sup> Economist Foreign Report, May 30, 1979.

<sup>11</sup> Economist Foreign Report, March 19, 1978, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



political parties in Peru and, of course, with UNIDAD, the Peruvian Communist Party. Peruvian dailies, including Expreso and El Comercio, link the PLO with "terrorism, violence and death."

From Peru, PLO representative Besseiso has traveled to Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela. In Ecuador, he opened a PLO office in Quito. This is seen as an attempt by Ecuador to establish equidistance between the PLO and Israel, after it was revealed that it was to receive 12 Israeli Kfir combat planes. Ecuadorian tolerance for PLO activities stems also from its desire for investment credits from the Arab world.

Venezuela, itself a member of OPEC, long has been a prime PLO target; efforts to open a PLO office in Caracas are expected to intensify after the December 1983 presidential elections. Thus far, Venezuelan governments have resisted pressure from Libya, the PLO, and the few but vocal pro-PLO supporters within the country.

The PLO is known to be operating on Venezuela's border with the "Colombian Guerrilla Group 4," whose goal is the "union of the Arab world in order to fight Jewish and American imperialism." In addition a Marxist arm of the PLO, the PFLP, is working with Colombia's M-19, Marxist-Leninist terrorists.<sup>13</sup>

The PLO and its Arab allies are lobbying vigorously to establish a PLO office in Bolivia. The Bolivian press has reported numerous instances of blackmail and financial inducements aimed at Bolivian officials. There also are considerable efforts to rally the support of Bolivia's large Arab emigre community. Arafat's deputy, Abu Jihad, is reported to have met in February 1982 with a delegation of leftist underground groups from Bolivia and its neighbors. The aim of the meeting reportedly was to forge a regional terrorist network.

#### The Bridge--Panama and Costa Rica

In September 1979, Yassir Arafat met in Havana with Panamanian President Aristedes Royo. The two pledged mutual support and arranged for the opening of an "unofficial" PLO office in Panama. This office works with the Panamanian-Arab League of Solidarity with the Palestinian People and the PLO, which is funded primarily by the Libyan Embassy. Thus far, their activities have been limited to the dissemination of anti-Jewish and anti-American propaganda.

In May 1982, Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge singled out the PLO and Libya as the primary threat to the internal security of his nation. Costa Rica's National Security Agency has evidence that Libya and the PLO jointly are indoctrinating

---

<sup>13</sup> Anti-Defamation League International Report, "PLO Activities in Latin America," revised May 1982, p. 17.

and giving military training to young "Marxist-oriented" Costa Ricans, in Libya, Lebanon, and Costa Rica. In January 1982, Costa Rican authorities disclosed the existence of at least 20 terrorist cells and a "safe-house" equipped with arms, food, and medical equipment.<sup>14</sup>

### Mexico

In 1976, Mexican President Luis Echeverria allowed the PLO opened an office in Mexico City. His successor, Miguel de la Madrid, however, refused to accord diplomatic status to the one PLO staff member permitted to reside in Mexico. This PLO representative, Ahmad Sobeh, and his "volunteers" work with the Asociacion Mexicana de Amistad con el Pueblo Palestino to court the student population and radical leftist groups. Working contacts have been established with the Social Workers Party (PST), the Socialist Unified Party of Mexico (PSUM), and the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT).

### CONCLUSION

The growing activism of the PLO in Latin America adds another dimension to the already serious threat posed by the Soviet and Cuban presence. Many of the central governments are weak and a small disciplined force, such as the PLO, can have a significant impact upon the political stability of these nations.

U.S. policy must take into account this increasing PLO presence. The governments of Latin America must be alerted to the very real dangers posed by the presence within their borders of a force openly hostile to the West, which envisions violent change as its path to success. The threat to the Jewish communities of Latin America must also be stressed.

The PLO is currently in disarray in the Middle East. Its factions are in violent conflict. It would be a painful irony--and one that can be prevented--were the PLO to find an effective base of operations in Latin America at the very time it is unraveling in its home base.

Prepared for The Heritage Foundation  
by Eileen Scully  
Washington, D.C.\*

---

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Crossette, "Terrorism in Costa Rica Causing Concern in U.S.," The New York Times, March 23, 1982.

\*Heritage Foundation Research Assistant Jay S. Marks contributed to this study.