

Revolution as Religion

Reconfiguring the world through ideology and victimhood

The 1960s are known to scholars as the Decade of Revolution. National wars of liberation broke out in many countries during that decade when Cold War tensions mounted between the Soviet Union and the U.S. As the two powers vied for global dominance, nations everywhere became oddly bi-polar, choosing one side or the other depending on whose financial support and narrative about freedom appealed most to aspiring revolutionary leaders.

The decade began with a shot across the bow of America's post-World War II ascendancy when Soviet Union premier Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech at the UN in June 1960. To kick off the new decade, he addressed the General Assembly in Marxist overtones:

"It is our duty to support the sacred struggle of the oppressed peoples and their just anti-imperialist wars of national liberation."

Anti-imperialist guerrilla wars soon captured the imagination of revolutionaries everywhere inspired by the belief they were part of a greater sacred struggle for liberty and justice. For its part, America was confident its own unassailable freedom was the reason it had prevailed with allies in World War II. After all, they'd defeated enemies on every front in the greatest war the world had ever seen.

Freedom from the Bottom Up

In 1960, the number of sovereign nations in Africa jumped from nine to twenty-seven in a single year.¹ Such was the global fervor for wars of liberation. The decade also saw Fidel Castro export his Cuban success to Latin and South America. He even sent advisors and troops to Ghana, Yemen and Angola to fight and train revolutionaries. Castro's second-in-command, Che Guevarra, an Argentinian-born physician turned freedom fighter, became an iconic champion for class struggle and a folk hero known worldwide.

Also in the 1960s, Mao Zedong launched his infamous Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution in China. Mao's *Little Red Book* of quotations published in 1964, is said to have ultimately totaled 6.5 billion copies in print worldwide. It was required reading at all levels of Chinese society during the fifteen years of revolutionary upheaval that followed its publication.

Stanford sociologist Andrew Walder concluded Mao's sayings inspired the Cultural Revolution which took off from the ground up as cadres of low level communists rose spontaneously against their district overlords. The insurgencies of students and workers that followed soon got out of hand. Some 1.7 million people in China died as a result, many due to famine, as farms and economic production faltered.

Mao's *Little Red Book* also became a hit among U.S. college students enamored with the idea of wars of liberation. They typically had no idea what the wars were about—similar to many who chanted "From the river to the sea, Palestine is free" in 2024. It was part of a burgeoning ethos of campus discontent that gained global momentum during the Vietnam War. To zealous students,

¹ Chief H. O. Domes, "The New African Profile," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1962, p 293.

it looked like America had lost its bearings by defending failed colonies left by antiquated European oppressors. America's riches and success became a perfect target for political discontent inspired by Marxist ideas of class struggle.

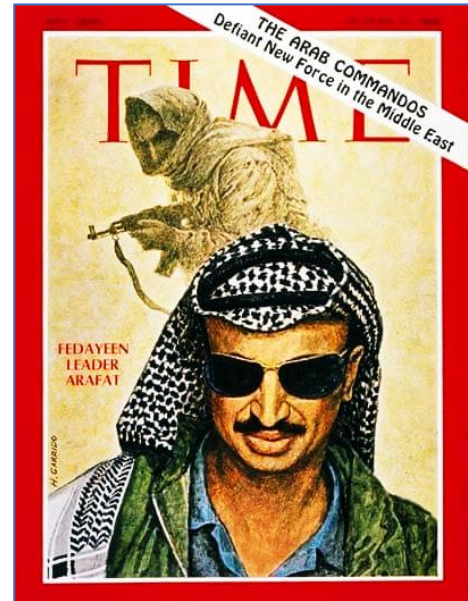
The PLO - Agent of Violent Change in the Mideast

True to the times, the Arab League met in Egypt in 1964 to form the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) dedicated to establishing an Arab state throughout the entire territory of "Mandatory Palestine." Their goal was to completely eliminate the State of Israel by means of armed struggle—a goal stated long before Israel had control of the West Bank or Gaza. A leader named Yasser Arafat quickly emerged as the alpha, a position he would hold for forty years.

The PLO's founding document was called the Palestinian National Covenant when it first appeared in English, reflecting the religious spirit behind it. Later it was rephrased a *Confederacy* and often referred to simply as a "Charter," making it sound less religious. It said **"armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine"** (Article 9) and called Israel **"entirely illegal"** (Article 19)—directly contradicting the UN Partition Mandate of 1947 that legally facilitated Israel's formation.

Article 15 of the PLO Charter enjoined other Arab nations to join in supporting armed struggle to liberate Palestine. It used familiar Marxist-Leninist terminology:

The liberation of Palestine, from an Arab viewpoint, is a national duty and it attempts to repel the Zionist and imperialist aggression against the Arab homeland, and aims at the elimination of Zionism in Palestine [aka Israel]. ...Accordingly, the confederacy of [Arab nations] must mobilize all its military, human, moral, and spiritual capabilities to participate actively with the Palestinian people in the liberation of Palestine.



Arafat's Dashing Defiance

Little known at first to the wider world, Yasser Arafat rose quickly and appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in December 1968, a mere four years after the PLO was founded. The story described a "defiant new force in the Middle East" comprised of "commandos"—*fedayeen* in Arabic—led by a dashing looking Arafat. He was only 5'2" tall, but he was a wiley street fighter and had great instincts for charming influencers and wielding power.

Arafat was clearly a product of the era of violent revolution. His resume included subversive activities that forced him to flee Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, before finding his niche plotting against Israel on behalf of Palestinian Arab liberation. An article in *The Guardian* summarized Arafat this way:

By the mid-70s the Palestinian as freedom fighter captured the imagination of the world. [The PLO's political arm] *Fatah* soon transmuted into a broad church that encompassed all shades

of Palestinian creed, opinion, and ideology.... [Arafat] saw himself as part of a global movement and as a member of an international revolutionary fraternity against injustice....

The Guardian wrote that Arafat hosted revolutionary movements from all over the world, offering them “refuge, military training, political support, and moral succor. Most Iranian anti-Shah cadres—Islamists, leftists and liberals—passed through *Fatah’s* camps in Lebanon.”²

Making Peace the Arafat Way

Arafat’s early history demonstrated he recognized the big picture of violent liberation ideology. He had the savvy of an Arab merchant like his father, skilled in bargaining to get what he wanted. These traits served him well as a liberation leader who had to blend into all walks of life to achieve his goals through charm, solicitousness, deception and force, as needed. In short, Arafat was a survivor, brave enough to fight in guerilla battles and shrewd enough to keep company with leaders of nations. At the peak of his fame he shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 with his arch enemy, Israeli prime minister Itzak Rabin, for having signed the Oslo Peace Accords.

While negotiating the Accords at the White House in 1993, Arafat explained to his supporters back home why he was involved in making peace with the enemy. He reiterated the PLO’s fundamental strategy developed twenty years earlier that Palestinians should seize whatever territory Israel was willing or forced to cede as a springboard until the “complete liberation of Palestine.” Specific PLO goals defined as early as 1974 still served Hamas and Hezbollah in 2024:

...preventing immigration and encouraging emigration... destroying tourism...weakening the Israeli economy and diverting the greater part of it to security requirements... [and] creating and maintaining an atmosphere of strain and anxiety that will force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel. ³

While standing at the White House for a photo op with Rabin and President Clinton, Arafat cleverly appeared simultaneously in a prerecorded message in Arabic on Jordanian television. He spoke about the PLO strategy and concluded by offering this blatantly anti-Israel, anti-Jewish apartheidist war cry:

“This is the moment of return, the moment of gaining a foothold on the first liberated Palestinian land.... Long live Palestine, *liberated and Arab.*”⁴ *Italics added.*

The Failed Oslo Peace Accords

During the negotiations that led to the Oslo Accords, the PLO asserted Israel is an illegal entity, denied any historical connection between Jews and Palestine, and labeled Zionism racist, imperialist and genocidal. Of course, the Jews objected. Arafat promised to remove the relevant articles but never did.⁵ Despite the Accords, the PA continued to teach and incite violence on Arabic television and through children’s textbooks and cartoons. Antisemitic tropes remained part of their arsenal, including publication of an Arabic edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/nov/13/-sp-yasser-arafat-why-he-still-matters>.

³ “Political Program for the Present Stage Drawn up by the 12th PNC, Cairo, June 9, 1974,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 1974, pp. 224-5.

⁴ Jordan Television Network (Amman), in Arabic, Sept. 13, 1993

⁵ See “Arafat’s Grand Strategy,” Efraim Karsh, the *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2004, pp. 3-11

The Accords required Arafat to stop buying weapons, but that, too, he continued doing, using huge sums donated by the international community for Palestinian economic development. Instead of spurring economic growth, the West Bank economy began tanking soon after the Nobel Prize ceremony. In the first five years of the new millennium, the World Bank estimates the economy of the territories shrank some 40 percent. Peace and prosperity were displaced by poverty and terror.⁶

Hamas would go on to replicate the PLO model under Arafat when they took over Gaza in 2007, redirecting public aid and adding illicit funds from drug trading and other sources to build its vast underground military metropolis.

Religion as Revolution

Arafat didn't gain his global notoriety as a religious zealot. Everyone knew his background, but religion never figured prominently in his rhetoric in the West. That changed during a speech he made in Johannesburg in 1994. He appealed to Muslims everywhere to recognize that the Oslo Accords represented the beginning of a greater undertaking to start a "jihad to liberate Jerusalem." In his words:

What they are saying is that [Jerusalem] is their capital. No, it is not their capital. It is our capital. It is the first shrine of Islam and the Moslems. We are accepting [the Oslo Peace Accords] now [as a] peace offer. But [only] to continue our way to Jerusalem, to the first shrine together and not alone. We are in need of you as Moslems, as warriors of Jihad.⁷

From then on Arafat explicitly positioned the PLO's strategy as a religious war of liberation grounded in deception and all in fundamental Islam.

Eventually, the "Camp David process" fell apart in July 2000, when Arafat and his team openly denied King Solomon's Temple ever existed on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This direct assault on biblical reality and pillar of Orthodox Judaism was a showstopper. It ended the summit. A violent uprising named for the *Al-Aqsa* mosque on the Temple Mount began within a few short months, likely planned before Arafat made his outrageous claims about Solomon's Temple. The *Al-Aqsa Intifada* would lead to the deaths of 1,000 Israelis—and 3,000 Palestinians—before ending in 2005.

It is noteworthy that the PLO's original charter never mentioned Jerusalem. The document also never mentioned creation of a Palestinian State. Article 24 deceitfully said:

This Organization does not exercise any territorial sovereignty over the West Bank in...Jordan, on the Gaza Strip or in the *Himmah* Area [Golan Heights, then under Syrian control]. Its activities will be on the national popular level in the liberational, organizational, political and financial fields.

The PLO's ultimate goals, anchored by Islamic principles, remained hidden for over thirty years, like tunnels beneath the topography of public statements and publicized appearances

⁶ The best summary of Palestinian economic development under Israel's governance, and subsequent collapse under Arafat and the PLO, is found in George Gilder's *The Israel Test* (2024 Second American Paperback Edition). See especially chapter 4 on the "Palestinian economy."

⁷ <https://iris.org.il/arafats-johannesburg-speech/>. Quote reflects original spelling of "Muslims." See also my brief on The Jihad Spirit of Islam."

Arafat made in the West. In the end, the man whose zeal was once identified with secular wars of liberation secured his legacy as the man whose revolution had *always* been about the Muslim reconquest of the Jew's ancient homeland in Palestine.

Arafat's Lasting Legacy

Arafat died under mysterious circumstances in 2004, leaving behind personal wealth estimated at US \$1.3 billion. Audits revealed the money came from public funds that remained unused on behalf of the Palestinian people.

The firepot of *jiḥād* in the Middle East today carries on by mixing liberation ideology with extreme religious zeal. Today's Muslim radicals are more direct than Arafat. They haven't disguised their faith nor their goals. But the PLO's strategy of creating an atmosphere of stress and anxiety to wear out Israel has not ended. Hamas and Hezbollah have taken it to an extreme that Arafat only dreamt of. Whether the Trump Administration's strong-armed policy of support for Israel succeeds in fully breaking the hegemony of anti-Israel powers in the region remains to be seen. But Hamas' boast that they succeeded in putting the Palestinian issue back on the table certainly cannot be disputed.

What else cannot be denied about the fiery revolutionary decade that began in the 1960s is that the very real material and spiritual needs of countless people worldwide, including Palestinian Arabs, have yet to be widely improved by violent means. Meanwhile, global protests and opposition to both Israel and America have taken on a religious zeal all their own.

To better understand why, it's useful to examine an unholy alliance that arose between the Nazis and Islamists that added rocket fuel to the fires burning in the hearts of zealous *jihadi* fighters. That's the topic of the next brief.

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