



## **The Ideological and Political Disputes within the Palestinian Leftist Nationalist Current (Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and Their Implications, 1967-1978**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study discusses the phenomenon of ideological and political disagreements inside the coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, being the second largest Palestinian guerrilla organization in terms of armament, organization, and number, after the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah). It dealt with its emergence and its ideological and organizational structure, and revealed the main internal crises it faced and their various outcomes. The study concluded that continuous disagreements have characterized the relationship between the components of the coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine since its creation in 1967, especially between the elements of the Palestinian Arab Nationalist Movement on one side and between the Nationalists and the Palestinian Liberation Front on the other side. Their positions were opposed toward many intellectual and political issues and events, which led, after a very short period from its establishment, to its split into several guerrilla organizations, each one having its own military capabilities, external alliances, positions toward the Palestinian national issues, and its own strategy to face the common enemy. Most of them*

were also exposed to internal division, which expanded the circle of Palestinian–Palestinian conflicts, and contributed to the spread of organizational and military chaos in the Arab countries hosting the Palestinian resistance – Jordan and then Lebanon – that started to work to get rid of it and expel it outside their territories.

**Keywords:** Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – ideological disputes – political disputes – organizational split.

## **Les différends idéologiques et politiques au sein du courant nationaliste palestinien de gauche (Coalition du Front populaire pour la libération de la Palestine) et leurs implications, 1967-1978**

### **Résumé :**

*Cette étude examine le phénomène des désaccords idéologiques et politiques au sein de la coalition du Front populaire de libération de la Palestine, deuxième organisation de guérilla palestinienne en termes d'armement, d'organisation et d'effectifs, après le Mouvement de libération nationale palestinien (Fatah). Elle traite de son émergence et de sa structure idéologique et organisationnelle, et révèle les principales crises internes auxquelles elle a été confrontée et leurs différentes issues. L'étude conclut que des désaccords continus ont caractérisé les relations entre les composantes de la coalition du Front populaire de libération de la Palestine depuis sa création en 1967, en particulier entre les éléments du Mouvement nationaliste arabe palestinien d'un côté et entre les nationalistes et le Front de libération de la Palestine de l'autre. Leurs positions étaient opposées sur de nombreuses questions et événements intellectuels et politiques, ce qui a conduit, peu de temps après sa création, à sa scission en plusieurs organisations de guérilla, chacune ayant ses propres capacités militaires, ses alliances externes, ses positions sur les questions nationales palestiniennes et sa propre stratégie pour faire face à l'ennemi commun. La plupart d'entre eux ont également été exposés à des divisions internes, qui ont élargi le cercle des conflits entre Palestiniens et contribué à la propagation du chaos organisationnel et militaire dans les pays arabes accueillant la résistance palestinienne – la Jordanie puis le Liban –, qui ont commencé à s'efforcer de s'en débarrasser et de l'expulser hors de leurs territoires.*

**Mots clés :** Coalition du Front populaire de libération de la Palestine – différends idéologiques – différends politiques – scission organisationnelle.



## Introduction

The Arab defeat in 1967 caused the decline of the status of Arab nationalist thought on both the Palestinian and Arab levels, after it proved its failure both in theoretical terms and in the field of national unifying action in facing “Israel” and in defending the Palestinian cause. It was subjected to criticism and accusation by various political and popular organizations and movements, on top of them the Palestinian branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement, which had highly relied on the Arab regimes in the issue of liberating Palestine and strongly believed that unity is the way to liberation. Its negative results led many Palestinian nationalist and liberal intellectuals to turn toward Marxist thought, in order to formulate a liberation project based on new ideological foundations (Abu Fakher, 2011, p. 84). They became convinced of the necessity to shift toward the Palestinian national work on the regional level, so they directed all their efforts toward establishing new Palestinian guerrilla organizations adopting the Marxist-Leninist thought, and guided by the international socialist experiences that had proven their success at that time and in different parts of the world in achieving independence. This was represented especially in the “Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.”

**So, what were the circumstances of the emergence of the Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine? And to what extent did the ideological and political disputes between its main components affect its unity and its struggle path?**

To answer the raised questions, we divided this study into three sections:

- **First Section:** The emergence of the Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.
- **Second Section:** The April/ August 1968 conferences and the beginning of the crisis inside the Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.
- **Third Section:** The implications of the crisis inside the Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

## **1. The Formation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine Coalition**

The idea of its creation dates back to before the June 1967 defeat, specifically to the second session of the Palestinian National Council, held from May 31 to June 4, 1965, in Cairo. During this session, the Arab Nationalist Movement – Palestine Branch issued a memorandum calling for the transformation of the Palestine Liberation Organization into a revolutionary popular organization that would bring together all Palestinian groups believing in armed struggle, and that would be responsible for both a regular and a popular army tasked with waging the fight against the Israeli enemy (Hussein & Badr, 2017, p. 19).

This memorandum served as an informal invitation to the leaders of Fatah, the Ba'athists, and the Arab Nationalist Movement, in addition to the Hattin Forces in Syria, the Qadisiyyah Forces in Iraq, and the Palestine Liberation Army, to convene and deliberate on a framework for a revolutionary Palestinian front.

Immediately after the June 1967 War, a number of Palestinian leaders met in Damascus at the home of Mr. Ali



Boushnaq (a leader of the Palestine Liberation Front). The meeting was attended by Yasser Arafat, Khalil al-Wazir, and Khaled al-Hassan from Fatah; George Habash and Wadi' Haddad from the Arab Nationalist Movement; and Ahmad Jibril and Ali Boushnaq from the Palestine Liberation Front, along with Palestinian Ba'athist elements in Syria.

- 1) During this meeting, it was decided to establish a militant front that would include representatives from all organizations committed to armed resistance, while maintaining internal autonomy for each group during a transitional period. This front would be governed by a unified leadership consisting of two members from each organization, convening every fifteen days. The meeting concluded with agreement on the following points:
- 2) The establishment of training camps in Syria in coordination with the Syrian authorities.
- 3) The collection of financial contributions across the Arab world to be deposited in a special fund for the Front.
- 4) The mobilization of Palestinians from the diaspora for training.
- 5) The collection of weapons from the 1967 war zones and their transfer to the West Bank, accompanied by military trainers to prepare and train Palestinians for carrying out commando operations inside the occupied territories.
- 6) Avoid contact with the Israeli enemy and refrain from clashing with it (Al Jazeera Channel, 2004).
- 7) But because some members of the unified leadership of the emerging front did not abide by the clauses of

the unity agreement, and because of their individual behaviours, this leadership was dissolved after it had met only four times. As “Ahmad Jibril” states in his testimony on *Witness to an Era*, members of Fatah did not comply with the financial clause; they received a sum of money from Iraq and refused to place it in the alliance’s dedicated fund. Also, elements from the same movement infiltrated the West Bank and began to carry out military operations against Israeli sites before completing the agreed preparations, and without referring back to the unified leadership, which resulted in obstructing Palestinians’ movement from the West Bank to the training centers on the Syrian border after “Israel” tightened control on those borders in reaction to these operations (Al Jazeera Channel, 2004).

Yezid Sayigh notes that Fatah violated its agreement with the Arab Nationalist Movement and the Palestine Liberation Front once again, and announced the resumption of fedayeen activity against “Israel” on 27/8/1967 under the title “*The Second Launch of the Armed Struggle*”, when it was able to provide a trained human force thanks to its organizational networks spread across Arab and European countries, exploiting both the dispersal of the Israeli army in the Arab occupied territories in the June 1967 war and the factor of Palestinian human migration outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip after their occupation, which facilitated movement and deployment inside the occupied territories (Sayigh, 1992, pp. 19–20).



The unitary Palestinian action split into two after Fatah's fedayeen activity\*, and each part took its own training camp; a camp for the Palestine Liberation Front and the Organization of the Heroes of Return near Douma northeast of Damascus, and a camp for Fatah in the Dumayr area northwest of Damascus (Ashtiyeh, 2011, pp. 96–97).

The Arab Nationalist Movement – Palestine Region – and the Youth of Revenge Organization, which were allotted to them, continued their attempts to find a new Palestinian front framework, inviting all factions and Palestinian organizations, whatever their orientations and affiliations, to unite in one framework that would shoulder the responsibility of confronting the Israeli enemy, instead of relying on the Palestine Liberation Organization, which had an official political character that did not allow it to achieve such a framework (Jalloud, 2016, p. 82). In response to this call, the Palestinian political and fedayeen forces – except Fatah – decided to create a revolutionary front (Al Jazeera Channel, 2004) modeled on the Algerian Front and the

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\* A political term used in the context of the Palestinian resistance refers to the **divisions** experienced by major Palestinian organizations and parties without exception—either peacefully or following armed conflict. The causes of splits within political parties and movements in general include:

- The struggle for leadership and authority.
- The eruption of crises regarding party programs and orientations.
- Disagreements over internal or external alliances.
- External interference in party policies, such as external incitement aimed at undermining party unity or the growing external influence leading to dependency and the loss of independence. (See: Muhammad Shtayyeh, *Encyclopedia of Palestinian Terms and Concepts*, Dar Al-Jalil for Publishing, Studies and Research, Amman, 2011, pp. 96–97).

Vietnamese Front, which waged both armed and political struggle in their countries until independence. Therefore, four fedayeen groups merged, namely:

- 1) The Organization of the Heroes of Return.
- 2) The Palestine Liberation Front led by Ahmad Jibril with all its branches (the Martyr Abd al-Latif Shururo Brigade, the Martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade, the Martyr Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni Brigade).
- 3) The National Front for the Liberation of Palestine – Youth of Revenge.
- 4) The Arab Nationalist Movement – Palestine Branch (Al-Dajani, 1969, p. 139).

In addition to a Nasserist group in Jordan led by Colonel Ahmad Za'rour and Bashir al-Busmati (Al Jazeera Channel, 2004).

In July 1967, the Executive Committee of the Arab Nationalist Movement decided to strike the Israeli enemy and its interests inside Palestine and abroad (Abu Fakhr, 2011, p. 83). In November of the same year, elements of the alliance carried out organized fedayeen operations in the occupied Palestinian territories (Abu Sharif, 2014, p. 56). On December 7, 1967, this group identified itself and declared that it was a unified organization of armed forces that had been active in the Palestinian fedayeen arena before the 1967 war, and on December 11 it issued its founding statement officially announcing the establishment of the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine Coalition*, explaining its principles, objectives (Al-Dajani, 1969, p. 139) and means, considering that armed struggle is the only method of dealing with the enemy, and that the masses are the fuel of this struggle and are called upon to engage in it to achieve





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victory (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 2016, p. 3).

The coalition of the Front, when it appeared, was based on the political and material heritage of the Arab Nationalist Movement, and on the long militant career of its founders; at their head George Habash, Wadie Haddad, and Hani al-Hindi. Thus, it became, in terms of importance, the second organization on the Palestinian political and military scene after Fatah (Abu Fakhr, 2011, p. 81).

In January 1969, the Basic Charter of the coalition was issued, which defined its goals, identity, and ideological affiliation through clarifying its positions toward the Palestinian cause and its relationship with the masses (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 1969, p. 2). Its political program was summarized in two main objectives: a transitional goal represented in struggling alongside other fedayeen organizations and the Arab forces and regimes to liberate Palestine by adopting armed struggle as the only method of liberation, and a strategic goal represented in liberating Palestine and establishing a democratic and unified state together with the Arab countries on the entire Palestinian land, with Jerusalem as its capital, where citizens would be equal in rights and duties without racial or religious discrimination.

It called on all the sons of the Palestinian people to participate in resisting the occupation alongside the fedayeen, emphasizing that Palestinian armed action alone determines who is the enemy and who is the friend at both the Arab and international levels, and it also announced the implementation of a policy of boycotting the Israeli enemy in all fields (Abu al-Qasim, 2009, pp. 116-117).

## **2. The Conferences of April/August 1968 and the Beginning of the Crisis within the Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine**

Disagreements began to accumulate inside the Arab Nationalist Movement (one of the main elements in the coalition) since the early 1960s, between the Freedom Group led by *Mohsen Ibrahim* (then head of the Arab Nationalist Movement office in Lebanon), which *Nayef Hawatmeh* later joined (Saadi, 1998, p. 174), on one side, and the founders of the movement led by *George Habash* on the other, when the movement started to absorb socialist ideas within its literature and objectives (Baumgarten, 2006, p. 248).

After the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, the disagreements and tensions deepened within the movement, and it was clearly divided into two opposing groups in their intellectual and political programs, on the background of the ideological transformation of most of its members from nationalism to Marxism-Leninism, and their distancing from the Egyptian regime.

The first group represented the founding leaders of the movement from the Arab nationalists of the right-wing bourgeois orientation, while the second group represented the nationalist elements who adopted the revolutionary leftist ideology (the ideology of workers, peasants, and the poor) (Official Spokesman of the Popular Front, 1971, p. 64), or the ideology of the working class.

Since the formation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine coalition, the second group had struggled against the program of the first, rejecting its leadership by bourgeois right-wing (capitalist) elements (Khourshid, 1971, p. 143). Most of its members were young university students in Arab countries, influenced by the



global leftist thought and by the ideas and activities of its leaders and theorists such as *Frantz Fanon*, *Mao Tse-Tung*, and *Ernesto Che Guevara*. This transformed the conflict between the two sides from an ideological struggle into a generational conflict (Sayigh, 2002, p. 343), or even into a personal political struggle for influence between the revolutionary nationalist youth led by *Nayef Hawatmeh* and the founding generation of the movement led by *George Habash* (Baumgarten, 2006, p. 249).

During the first national conference of the coalition, held in April 1968, the second group (the leftist current) presented its program that called for literal commitment to Marxism (Abu Fakh, 2011, p. 84), whose content was summarized as follows (Abu al-Qasim, 2009, p. 137):

- 1) Complete alignment with the ideology of the working class.
- 2) Structuring internal and external relations of the organization within the law of socialist democratic centralism.
- 3) Transferring the guerrilla struggle to the occupied Palestinian territories; Gaza Strip and the West Bank.
- 4) Fighting "Israel" and the client regimes and imperialist systems behind it (the reactionary regimes).
- 5) The necessity of transferring the battle to the eastern bank (Jordan).

After the holding of this conference, the disagreement intensified, as the leftist group led by *Nayef Hawatmeh* accused the coalition leadership of intellectual backwardness, and of being dependent and subservient to the Arab regimes whose programs and strategies (the pan-

Arab nationalist ones) were, according to them, the direct cause of the Arab defeat before Israel in 1967 (Abu Sharif, 2014, p. 56). They remained silent and did not seek the reasons behind the defeat, avoiding interference in any matter related to the Palestinian cause under the slogan of “non-interference in Arab affairs.”

The leftist group considered that the Arab states, especially Jordan, were nothing but small bourgeois regimes linked to imperialism and colonialism, incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle against “Israel,” and that they prevented the Palestinians from solving their cause and from arming themselves for struggle (Chalian, 1969, p. 25).

This current also described the leadership of the Palestinian revolution (the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization) as a backward and failed leadership that refused to change, which through its behaviors strengthened power centers and private fiefdoms and glorified the individual (Official Spokesman of the Popular Front, 1971, p. 64), while neglecting the political and ideological mobilization and awareness of the Palestinian people.

As a result of this conflict and the indirect accusations directed at the Egyptian leadership, Egyptian President *Gamal Abdel Nasser* ordered to cut relations with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine coalition, to stop supplying it with weapons, and to expel the Palestinians being trained in its camps on Egyptian soil (Abu Sharif, 2014, p. 58).

In August 1968, the coalition held its first conference in Jordan (Ain al-Rummaneh), known as the August Conference, in the absence of its leader *George Habash*, who was imprisoned in Syrian jails since March 19, 1968, along



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with a group of other leaders accused of conspiring with the Syrian opposition to overthrow the Syrian regime.

During this period, the conflict broke out between the supporters of both sides. The right-wing nationalist current (the bourgeois right) defended itself against the accusations directed toward it, confirming that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was the organization of the working class (the proletariat). It also defended the petty bourgeoisie and its regimes, which could not be considered part of the enemy camp. However, during this conference, a third current appeared, standing between the two conflicting sides, affirming that the struggle was a liberation struggle, not a class struggle of the working class or the bourgeoisie. It called for ending the dispute but to no avail, as the conference ended without electing a new leadership for the coalition due to each side rejecting the other's proposal (Abu Sharif, 2014, p. 58).

- 1) Nevertheless, before that, they agreed to draft a final document for the conference called the "August Document," whose last chapter was entitled "**The Path of Salvation**," and it included the following resolutions:
- 2) Commitment to the revolutionary scientific ideology (the ideology of the working class) to eliminate colonialism, Zionism, reactionism, and backwardness; because the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie is incapable and unqualified to bear the burdens of struggle or revolutionary work.
- 3) The cancellation of the defeated regimes' programs and the non-recognition of the Security Council Resolution No. 242.

- 4) Commitment to the project of building a broad and strong front that adopts a program for national salvation, implemented by strong wills armed with ideological, political, and military weapons, possessing proletarian political and ideological awareness hostile to colonialism and its allies in the Arab countries (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 2019).

This document defined the enemies and friends of the Front. It considered the reactionary capitalist regimes, global Zionism, imperialism, and “Israel” as enemies that must be fought. In contrast, it regarded workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, soldiers, and revolutionary intellectuals as friends to cooperate with and rely upon in the liberation process (Abu al-Qasim, 2009, p. 119). It combined in its goals between armed struggle and political action in the liberation work, which explains its transition from a bourgeois organization to a revolutionary workers’ party that adopted Marxist-Leninist philosophy (Kayyali et al., [n.d.], pp. 649–650) based on the ideas of “Mao Tse-Tung” (Jalloud, 2016, p. 129), applying the saying “No revolution without a revolutionary theory” (Faraj, 1998, p. 148), considering Marxist-Leninist philosophy as a scientific revolutionary ideology hostile to imperialism, Zionism, reactionism, and backwardness, taking the toiling popular classes as its moving energy.

The Arab Nationalist Movement (within the Popular Front coalition) shifted toward Marxist thought (Rassas, 2013) in both political and liberation aspects, intersecting in this with most Palestinian organizations spread across the Palestinian arena, but not in a clear way (Dudin, 2010, p. 36).



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After the delay in publishing the resolutions of the conference, the leftist elements in the Arab Nationalist Movement accused the right-wing elements of renouncing these resolutions (Sayigh, 2002, p. 343), which deepened the disagreements between the two sides.

In October 1968, members of the coalition held a meeting in Beirut, during which they made several decisions against the organization “Shabab al-Thar” (Youth of Vengeance), one of the nationalist elements of the coalition. These decisions included permanently expelling it from the Front, canceling any relations with it, and accepting only some of its members as fedayeen within its armed forces.

These measures were considered a response to what the members of this organization (“Shabab al-Thar”) had done when they began extending their control over the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and directing it in a way that did not conform with the resolutions of the August 1968 Conference, in implementation of the resolutions of the meeting held by the Arab Nationalist Movement in Beirut in December 1967, which had assigned “Shabab al-Thar” to lead the Front (Khurshid, 1971, p. 198).

### **3. The Repercussions of the Crisis within the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine Coalition**

The aforementioned events caused the beginning of the disintegration of unity among the members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine coalition, after coexistence under ideological conflicts and political disagreements became impossible. This led the Palestine Liberation Front, led by “Ahmad Jibril,” and the group of independents to declare their organizational independence

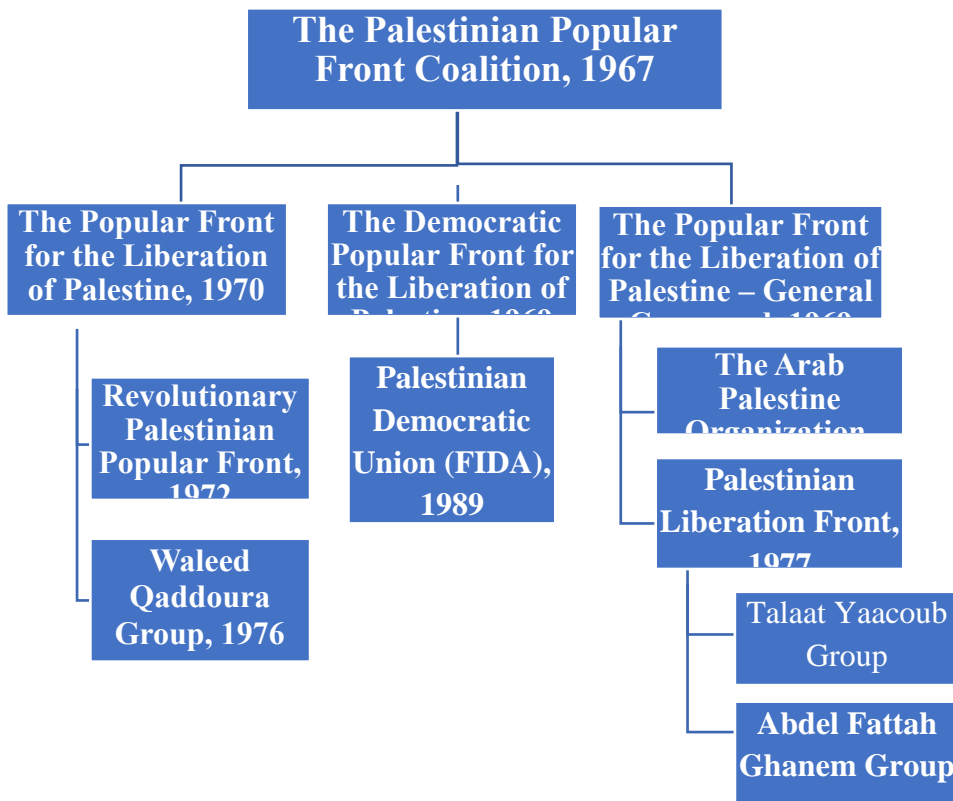
on 10/10/1968 under the name **“Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command,”** rejecting the domination of the nationalists over the coalition. Later, the leftist nationalist elements of the Arab Nationalist Movement, led by “Nayef Hawatmeh,” declared their independence under the name **“Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine”** on 22/1/1969 (Nouman, 2012, p. 135).

The name **“Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine”** remained limited to the group “Shabab al-Thar” associated with the Arab Nationalist Movement led by **George Habash**. The splinter organizations also experienced internal cracks, which led to an increase in the number of Palestinian organizations that, through their sometimes unified and sometimes divided stances, proved their presence in the stages of Palestinian national action in both its political and military aspects. The following diagram illustrates this.





## Illustrative diagram of the fedayeen organizations that split from the Coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine



**Source:** prepared by the researcher according to the information available to he

### 3.1. Split – Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (General Command)

Table showing the military capabilities of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command 1969–1974

Number of fighters	Military bases	Armament	Sources of armament	Major military operations
200 fighters in 1968 – described as highly combat-efficient “guerrilla warfare”	<i>Syria</i>			
<i>Jordan (1970–1971)</i>				
<i>Syria and Lebanon (1971–1973)</i>				
<i>South Lebanon – eastern sector</i>	<i>Light weapons</i>			
<i>Kalashnikov rifles</i>				
<i>Modified Polish (arms)</i>				
<i>Rocket launchers</i>				



<i>Remote detonation devices</i>	<i>Syria</i>			
<i>Free market</i>				
<i>Palestinian organizations</i>				
<i>Iraq</i>				
<i>Libya</i>				
<i>Eastern European countries</i>	Between 1968–1969 about 401 combat operations; most important: the assault on the settlement “Kiryat Shmona” north of Palestine in April 1974.			

**Source:** Salama Zidan Abu al-Qasim, op. cit., pp. 131–133 (adapted)

### ***3.1.1. Establishment and Objectives:***

The political positions and relations of the *Arab Nationalist Movement* were among the main reasons for the conflict between the nationalists and the *Palestine Liberation Front*. According to **Ahmed Jibril**, the leader of the *Palestine Liberation Front*, the Arab Nationalist Movement had a wide and deep political reach in the Arab region due to its pan-

Arab orientation since its inception. This led it to establish ties with some Arab regimes, engage with various political issues on the Arab scene, and even interfere in personal disputes between Arab leaders. As Jibril noted, this diverted the coalition from its primary objective—the unified armed struggle against the Israeli enemy (**Al Jazeera Channel, 2004**).

These relations and political maneuvers were not part of the Palestine Liberation Front's strategy, nor that of its main leader Ahmed Jibril, who was trained in military strategy and focused solely on solving the Palestinian issue through armed struggle (Al Jazeera Channel, 2004). He continuously rejected the dominance and supervision of Arab Nationalist Movement elements over the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) coalition (Faraj, 1998, pp. 153–154), especially in financial matters, since only a small part of the funds was allocated to military purposes, while most were directed toward political and media activities.

He also criticized the Marxist-Leninist ideology (the theory of the working class) adopted by the PFLP coalition for failing to consider the subjective and objective conditions of the Palestinian people. In his view, its leadership should have first prepared conscious revolutionary cadres capable of leading and guiding the people before adopting this approach, and should have strengthened the leftist trend within the Palestinian resistance movement through dialogue and critique, instead of importing ready-made ideological doctrines from abroad (Khorshid, 1971, p. 205).

The conflict came to light during the crisis between elements of the Arab Nationalist Movement and Syria, following the arrest of George Habash in Syria on charges of conspiracy against the regime. The Palestine Liberation



Front issued several statements denying any connection with the Arab Nationalist Movement and disavowing its actions (Al-Dajani, 1971, p. 102). Subsequently, Ahmed **Jibril** announced his withdrawal from the coalition in October 1968 and declared that he would operate under the name *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command* (PFLP-GC).

As a result of this split, the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* became synonymous with the *Arab Nationalist Movement*, especially since the *Heroes of the Return Organization*—which remained within the coalition—also had a nationalist orientation (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 2019). George Habash stated that this allowed the *Arab Nationalist Movement – Palestine branch* to present its revolutionary approach and political thought concerning the battle for Palestine's liberation through the PFLP. Consequently, there was an almost complete overlap between the *Arab Nationalist Movement* and the PFLP in structure, size, and political ideology (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 1970, p. 138).

After the split, the *PFLP–General Command* moved toward independent action, holding its first conference at the end of 1968, where it defined its political program (“The Charter”). In September 1969, during its second conference, it adopted Scientific Socialism as the theoretical foundation for its principles and objectives (Mawdoo3 Website, 2016; Faraj, 1998, pp. 153–154).

During its third conference on April 16, 1971, it reaffirmed adherence to the same path and formulated a political and organizational program inspired by Scientific Socialism. Its fourth conference, held on March 30, 1973, was the most

significant in its struggle, reaffirming Palestinian unity and continued commitment to Scientific Socialism. The movement considered itself a mass organization independent of all political parties or movements, whether Palestinian or Arab, adopting a revolutionary doctrine based on military professionalism and specialized forces. It embraced guerrilla warfare tactics against Israel while calling for the utilization of regular Arab armies' capabilities, arguing that armed resistance alone was insufficient. This led Ahmed Jibril and his forces to withdraw from the Battle of Karameh on March 21, 1968, which negatively affected the group's popular reputation and Palestinian unity (Abu Al-Qasim, 2009, pp. 129-131).

The *PFLP-General Command* supported **Syria's policies** in the region, earning continuous material and military support from Damascus and stability until 1970 (Faraj, 1998, p. 152). Between 1970 and 1971, it was based in Jordan. After the expulsion of Palestinian resistance forces, it relocated between Syria and Lebanon (1971-1973) and then regrouped entirely in southern Lebanon's western sector after 1973, also receiving financial and military support from Iraq, Libya, and Eastern European countries (Abu Al-Qasim, 2009, p. 132).

The *PFLP-General Command* itself later faced an internal split due to a conflict between its two main figures, Ahmed Jibril and Ahmed Za'rour (a former Jordanian army officer), leading Za'rour to establish the Arab Palestine Organization in early August 1969 (Nouman, 2012, p. 136). The organization adopted a Nasserist nationalist ideology, advocating Arab unity within socialist principles, but it dissolved in July 1971 and merged into *Fatah* during the



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Eighth Palestinian National Council session in Cairo (Feb 28–Mar 5, 1971) (Faraj, 1998, p. 152).

The fourth conference (March 30, 1973) also saw the emergence of two opposing factions: the historic leadership faction and the Abu Al-Abbass–Talaat Yaqoub faction, the latter maintaining secret relations with Iraq, the Rejectionist Front, and Fatah's security apparatus (led by Salah Khalaf) to secure financial and moral support to strengthen its internal position (Palestine Memory, n.d., pp. 52–53).

In **April 1977**, **Yasser Arafat**, chairman of the *Palestine Liberation Organization*, decided to divide the PFLP–GC into two groups: the *General Command* and the *Palestine Liberation Front*, due to disputes between *Fatah* and the PFLP–GC in Lebanon over the Syrian military intervention during the early phase of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1976) (**Al-Abbasi, 1991, pp. 158, 86**). **Mohammed Abbas and Talaat Yaqoub** were assigned leadership, but only around 100 members joined, operating under Iraqi direction.

The *PFLP–General Command* and the newly formed *Palestine Liberation Front* later engaged in armed clashes in Lebanon, most notably the **bombing of the PLF's main headquarters** in August 1977, which killed around 200 people (**Jalloud, 2016, pp. 129–130**).

### 3.1.2. *Its Relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization and Other Fedayeen Movements*

The Popular Front – General Command participated in the sessions of the Palestinian National Council held before the defeat of 1967, but its participation was only partial (symbolic) so that it would not appear passive. However, after the war, it accepted to take part in the sixth session of

the National Council held from February 1 to 6, 1969, in order to contribute to assessing the situation and determining the future by presenting its political and military perspectives. It also joined the Armed Struggle Command, which was established at the beginning of 1969, because the Popular Front – General Command believed that unity was one of the essential requirements of the battle to achieve victory, as it had already undertaken several unification experiences since its formation at the end of 1959 with Fatah Movement and with the Arab Nationalists Movement – Palestine Branch. (Khorshid, 1971, pp. 201–202)

### 3.2. The Split of the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

#### 3.2.1. *Table showing the military capabilities of the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (1969–1973)*

Number of Fighters	Military Bases	Armament	Sources of Armament	Most Important Military Operations
<b>60–100 fighters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jordan</li> <li>- Syria and Lebanon (Golan, Arkoub)</li> <li>- South Lebanon and Palestinian camps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Automatic rifles</li> <li>- Anti-tank launchers</li> <li>- Heavy and medium machine guns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Syria</li> <li>- Soviet Union</li> </ul>	<p>They reached 193 operations, the most important of which were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Beisan Operation</li> <li>- Tiberias Operation</li> </ul>





	after 1972 - Syria and Lebanon (1971-1973) - South Lebanon, eastern sector	- Recoilless guns		- Ain Zeef Operation in Jerusalem - Tarshiha Operation
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**Source:** Salameh Zidan Abu Al-Qasim, *the previous reference*, p. 140 (*adapted*)

### 3.2.2. *Origin and Objectives:*

Despite the fundamental agreement regarding the content of the *August Document* among members of the Arab Nationalists Movement, the leftist nationalist elements led by *Nayef Hawatmeh* continued to prepare for the process of separation despite all reform attempts led by the coalition leaders. This group announced its organizational independence (its split) on January 22, 1969, under the name The Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 2019)

The split occurred immediately after the right-wing elements rejected the idea of holding a democratic conference to determine the majority entitled to act on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which had been proposed by the left-wing group. (Khorshid, 1971, p. 144) In February of the same year, the leftist elements issued a political statement in which they declared the termination of their relations with the right-wing of both the

Arab Nationalists Movement and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, as well as the liquidation of the Arab Nationalists Movement in form and substance. They called upon all progressives in the Arab countries to create revolutionary national experiences away from all forms of party fanaticism. (Memory of Palestine, 1969)

Among its most prominent founders, in addition to *Nayef Hawatmeh*, were *Abd al-Karim Hamad*, *Saeed al-Batal*, and *Yasser Abd Rabbo*. In early June 1969, two leftist organizations joined it: *The Revolutionary Left League* and *The Popular Organization for the Liberation of Palestine*. (Abu Fakhr, 2011, p. 85) In 1972, some leading figures from the Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Palestine also joined it after that front split from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (the heir of the coalition). (The Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestinian Cause, 2025)

Starting from 1974, it carried the name The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Faraj, 1998, p. 149), which itself experienced a split in 1989 by *Yasser Abd Rabbo*, who founded the Palestinian Democratic Union Party (FIDA). (Jalloud, 2016, p. 130)

In addition to the ideological, political, and personal reasons mentioned above that led to the leftist elements' secession from the Arab Nationalists Movement, there were also other causes mentioned by those who lived and participated in the events of that period. Among them was *Bassam Abu Sharif* (one of the founders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), who stated that the internal conflict within the Arab Nationalists Movement occurred before the fifth session of the Palestinian National Council (1–6 February 1968), which was to decide who would control the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).



He added that the Fatah Movement supported *Nayef Hawatmeh* and his group financially, militarily, and organizationally to encourage the split so that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine would not obtain the majority of council membership on one hand, and to ensure the support of the defectors on the other. According to him, the conflict between the two sides was a fabricated one aimed at dividing the Arab Nationalists Movement and weakening its position and strength among other organizations (Al-Hiwar Satellite Channel, 2022), as well as on the Arab stage, because it was the greatest rival to the Fatah Movement.

*Ahmad Jibril*, in his testimony in *"Witness to the Era"*, supports this view, saying that the Fatah Movement played a significant role in dividing the Arab Nationalists Movement, represented by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine coalition, and that *Nayef Hawatmeh* would not have split without the protection and sponsorship of the Fatah leadership. (Al Jazeera Satellite Channel, 2004)

Likewise, the Palestinian thinker and historian *Maher Al-Sharif*, in his book *"Searching for an Entity,"* confirms the support of the Fatah Movement for the split operations inside the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, explaining that some of its members believed that the multiplication of fedayeen movements would serve the armed resistance — without considering the dangers resulting from such fragmentation. These dangers led to negative competition that appeared on Jordanian soil to attract the Jordanian people (Al-Sharif, 1995, p. 172) and for leadership itself (Al-Abbasi, 1991, p. 124), such as the rivalry

that existed between Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

At the beginning of August 1970, the Democratic Front held its first founding conference, during which it adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology (Abu Fakhir, 2011, p. 85), which had been included in the *August 1968 Document*, and it emphasized the necessity of military action on both the internal and external fronts.

But due to the difficult situation in the occupied territories, it turned — like the rest of the Palestinian fedayeen organizations — toward focusing on border operations and building its military forces abroad, relying on popular mobilization and organization inside and outside Palestine, and on small groups suited to the guerrilla warfare style along the Palestinian-Jordanian borders.

After the Palestinian resistance left Jordan in 1971, it adopted the system of larger groups and the use of medium and heavy weapons (artillery and rocket launchers). Its forces, known as the *Revolutionary Armed Forces*, were divided into militias, national security forces, and semi-regular units. At the beginning of its establishment, it depended mainly on its own capabilities in training and armament, while receiving some support from Syria and the Soviet Union through special training centers on Jordanian soil. After leaving Jordan, it settled in Lebanon, where it managed to provide its members with high-level external training in foreign countries, especially in the Soviet Union.

In addition to its great concern with military work, it also emphasized the necessity of political and popular work that would support and strengthen the military struggle. For that reason, starting from 1971, it participated in the diplomatic activity of the **Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)**



within the delegations that the organization sent to various countries around the world to represent the Palestinian people and internationalize the Palestinian cause. (Abu al-Qasim, 2009, pp. 138-140)

### *3.2.3. Its relations with the PLO and the Palestinian Resistance Organizations:*

After the split of the **Democratic Popular Front**, a sharp media conflict erupted between it and the right-wing nationalist elements within the coalition, during which they exchanged accusations and justifications. This was accompanied by widespread arrests, continuous searches, and raids against the Democratic Front's members inside the Palestinian camps near Amman, (Official Spokesman of the Popular Front, 1971, p. 53) with the aim of suppressing and eliminating the split. (Khorshid, 1971, p. 144)

This conflict led to armed clashes between the two sides at the beginning of 1969, after the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)** forces bombed the **Democratic Front's** positions with mortar shells in *Al-Hussein Camp* (Amman), which resulted in chaos and instability and provoked the Jordanian government (Al-Abbasi, 1991, pp. 122-123), which consequently decided to expel all Palestinian resistance factions from Jordan and end the armed Palestinian presence on its territory by force.

The **Democratic Front** viewed the **Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)** as a necessary framework for national unity. It also considered the transformation that occurred in the PLO at the end of 1969 as a positive one since it led to a change in its methods and to its emancipation from Arab tutelage. However, it saw the need to reform and adjust the

organization by removing all reactionary (capitalist) and bureaucratic elements from its structures — which it described as mercenaries and political traders. It called for the reformation of both the **Palestinian National Council** and the **Executive Committee** based on an equal or semi-equal quota representative system and for reforming the financial system by reducing dependence on foreign aid and cutting down expenditures. (Khorshid, 1971, pp. 152–153)

It also called for the development and reform of the **Palestinian Liberation Army** by abolishing class privileges within its ranks and by involving it effectively in the liberation process. (The Political Bureau of the Democratic Front, 2007, p. 38) The **Democratic Front** participated in the sessions of the sixth **Palestinian National Council** (1–6 February 1969) and joined the **PLO Executive Committee**, from the perspective that true leftism is that which deals with reality, analyzes it, and seeks to change and develop it. (Khorshid, 1971, p. 146)

It criticized the *regionalist tendency* of the **Fatah Movement** and its approach of non-interference in Arab internal affairs, considering that this orientation would inevitably lead to the separation of the Palestinian cause from its Arab surroundings. (The Political Bureau of the Democratic Front, 2007, p. 38) Nevertheless, it supported the armed struggle launched by Fatah in 1965, and it opposed the *self-rule project* in the West Bank in 1971, as well as the proposal of establishing a Palestinian state on only part of the land of Palestine. (Abu al-Qasim, 2009, p. 139)



### 3.3. The Rooting of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

#### 3.3.1. A Table Showing the Military Capabilities of the PFLP Forces

Number of Fighters	Military Bases	Armament	Sources of Armament	Major Military Operations
From 120 fighters in 1968 to 800 fighters in 1973	Anshas in Egypt Jordan Syria Lebanon in the eastern sector (Arqoub)	Recoilless guns (106 mm) Light mortars Automatic rifles – light and medium machine guns Anti-tank rockets Rocket launchers Anti-aircraft guns (SAMs) (Tanks after 1982)	Egypt Palestinian Liberation Army Battlefields of 1967 Free market Iraq Libya (North Korea, Soviet Union, and Eastern European countries after 1978)	Aircraft hijacking

**Source:** Salama Zidan Abu Qasim, Previous Reference, pp. 120–126 (adapted).

### 3.3.2. *Emergence and Objectives:*

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine inherited the coalition's name after the withdrawal (secession) of both the Popular Front – General Command and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. However, it eliminated all the references to *Mao Tse-Tung's* thought from the organizational document adopted by the coalition during the August 1968 Conference (Jalloud, 2016, p. 129). It confirmed under the leadership of its Secretary-General, *George Habash*, during its second conference held in February 1969, a new document titled *The Political and Organizational Strategy*, which affirmed the Marxist-Leninist orientation as the ideological approach of the Front (Faraj, 1998, p. 148).

During its third conference in 1973, the Front adopted in its internal statute the three democratic Leninist principles: collective leadership, self-criticism and working with the people, and armed struggle (Hussein & Badr, 2017, p. 20).

From a strategic point of view, it adopted the three classical stages of revolutionary struggle against the Israeli occupation: strategic defense against “Israel”, reaching the stage of general defense and Arab strategic attack. In clearer terms, it meant first going through a phase of guerrilla warfare to avoid a lost confrontation, followed—after achieving parity—by decisive and continuous confrontations waged by the regular Arab armies until victory. In other words, it called for a war of attrition executed by militias or *fedayeen* supported by regular Arab armies and their advanced weapons.

It rejected all initiatives recognizing the Zionist entity and opposed any negotiations with it, as well as the two Security Council resolutions No. 242 and No. 338. The Front strongly





opposed the idea of establishing a Palestinian state on only a part of Palestine.

The PFLP launched the slogan "*The inside is the base, and the outside is the support.*" For this reason, it concentrated a large part of its military forces at the beginning of its activity inside the occupied Palestinian territories. However, it faced a very strong Israeli reaction, which forced it to move toward Jordan to continue its resistance activity (Abu Qasim, 2009, p. 125).

It became internationally known for its method of hijacking civilian aircraft (Abu Qasim, 2009, pp. 125–126), which was characterized by a high level of accuracy, planning, and organization. The Front considered this method an effective strategy to attract supporters and sympathizers, a powerful means to internationalize the Palestinian cause and to break the Israeli siege, and also a way to prove its presence in the Palestinian and Arab political-military arena in confrontation with *Fatah Movement*, whose political and military influence was constantly increasing in both the Palestinian and Arab scenes (Sayigh, 2002, pp. 323–325).

It was, however, subjected to criticism and attack by other Palestinian organizations and some Arab and international circles, which described its strategy as revolutionary violence and international terrorism, claiming it targeted civilians and harmed the reputation of the Palestinian revolution. This method was among the main causes of its disputes with other Palestinian organizations operating in the Jordanian arena (1969–1971).

In 1972, an ideological conflict emerged within the Front, leading to a split by the pro-Syrian leftist group, which

formed a new organization under the name *The Revolutionary Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*. The new group did not exceed 50 members (Abu Qasim, 2009, pp. 119–120), under the leadership of *Abu Shahab*, who insisted on the resignation of the old generation of leadership and the transformation into a Marxist–Leninist party. However, this new front dissolved itself at the end of 1974 after its demands were not considered (Nu'man, 2012, p. 135). With the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1976, another group split from it under the leadership of *Walid Qaddoura*, known by his name (Faraj, 1998, p. 148).

### ***3.3.3. Its Relations with the Palestinian Resistance Organizations:***

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) shared with *Fatah Movement* the same revolutionary work strategy and its sequential stages (as mentioned earlier). However, *Fatah* gave these stages different titles, such as the “*People's Familiar War*,” to be executed by the militia or the local defense forces, or by the *fedayeen* and partisans who represent the main forces in the resistance struggle.

The *Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)*, however, disagreed with both *Fatah* and the *PFLP* on the application of this theory. It argued that the land of Palestine was not suitable for guerrilla warfare because it lacked the two essential elements of area and geography, along with the popular support element. The DFLP cited the Algerian Revolution as an example, which, according to them, achieved victory only because it possessed the geographical framework and its vastness, in addition to the availability of broad local and international support for the Algerian cause (Sayigh, 2002, p. 301).



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The PFLP maintained good relations with Arab nationalists in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, as well as with the Palestinian Liberation Army, which enabled it to secure most of its military and logistical needs, both in terms of weapons and training centers. It obtained arms from Egypt and Iraq for a long period, and from Libya starting in 1968. Its members received training in the *Anshas* camp in Egypt and in Jordan before the 1967 war, then in Syria and Jordan after the 1967 war, and finally in Lebanon after the departure of the Palestinian resistance from Jordan in 1971.

After Egypt signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1978 and entered the phase of Arab boycott, the Front turned toward *North Korea*, the *Soviet Union*, and the *Eastern European countries* to cover its various military needs (Abu Qasim, 2009, p. 121).

## Results

This study has finally reached a set of conclusions, which can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The Arab defeat in the 1967 war contributed to the rise of Palestinian identity (*al-kiyaniyya al-filastiniyya*) and transformed the Palestinian question from its Arab framework into a purely Palestinian one, after the decline of the Arab nationalist unification ideology and the retreat of Arab regimes' interest in the Palestinian issue.
- 2) The *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* coalition emerged as a revolutionary Palestinian front framework, based on the political and material legacy of the *Arab Nationalist Movement*, which had within it

transitioned toward Marxist thought in both its political and liberationist dimensions.

- 3) The division of the *Arab Nationalist Movement – Palestinian branch* into a bourgeois right and a democratic left, along with its political positions, relations, and regional extensions, led to the disintegration of the unity of the *PFLP coalition* and its fragmentation into several resistance organizations. Each of these possessed its own military capacities, foreign alliances, positions on the national Palestinian issues, and strategies in confronting the common enemy.
- 4) The split of the leftist current led to:
  - The tearing apart of its unity and the dispersion of its human and military resources
  - The increase in the number of Palestinian resistance factions in both the Palestinian and Arab arenas.
  - The widening of the internal Palestinian-Palestinian conflict in all its forms and manifestations (mutual suspicion, conspiracy, internecine fighting, etc.).
  - The spread of organizational and military chaos in the Arab host countries of the Palestinian resistance—first Jordan and then Lebanon—which disturbed the authorities of these states and pushed them to work toward eliminating or expelling the resistance forces from their territories.
  - The unintended contribution to the weakening of the Palestinian cause at all levels, distorting



the image of the Palestinian national struggle and diminishing its effectiveness.

1. The *PFLP coalition* could have constituted an internal leftist opposition force within the *Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)* against the rightist current (*Fatah Movement*), which managed to impose its vision regarding the handling of the Palestinian issue for a long time.

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