

MERIA

THE POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE-GENERAL COMMAND (PFLP-GC) AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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As the Asad regime's most loyal Palestinian proxy, the PFLP-GC's role in the conflict in Syria is of great importance. Currently, the group's interests center on countering Syrian rebel forces in Syria and their allies in Lebanon. In this role, the PFLP-GC has suffered a number of significant losses, and for the first time in its existence is being pressed in all areas it operates. This article will focus on the Syrian Civil War's effects on the PFLP-GC and what the future may hold for the group.

Maghrabi fell to soothing, and said, "Obey me, therefore, in all I bid thee, and shortly thou shalt forget all this travail and toil whenas thou shalt look upon the marvel-matters I am about to show thee" ... Aladdin...was dumbed and dazed at the Maghrabi's words and

BACKGROUND ON ASAD'S PALESTINIANS

From the use of barometrically detonated bombs to destroy airliners in the 1970s, to a bloody hang glider attack on an Israeli barracks in 1987, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) has historically demonstrated a preference for innovative and brutally violent tactics.² However, the once leading state-backed international terrorist organization is now little more than a local proxy militia used to serve the interests of Syrian leader Bashar al-Asad. As Syria fractures due to the ongoing civil war, the Asad regime's utilization of their PFLP-GC's proxy has increased. Unfortunately for the PFLP-GC, the increased utilization of its forces has also irreparably damaged the organization.

Founded in 1968 by Ahmad Jibril, the PFLP-GC was ostensibly created out of a desire by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to devote more attention to militancy than to Marxian ideology. Due to the highly fractious nature of Palestinian leftist groups, the PFLP-GC was

rejoiced..." O my uncle, bid me do all thou pleasest, for I will be obedient unto thy bidding." – Sir Richard Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, 1885.¹

just one of many "Popular Front" style organizations espousing a mixture of militancy and Marxism.³ However, the PFLP-GC did not fade into the history books with the collapse of the Soviet Union or by being folded into larger groups. Instead, the PFLP-GC made a name for itself and quickly became a small but leading Syrian-backed Palestinian entity.

Without the Asad regime, it is likely the PFLP-GC could not have continued to exist. Gary Gambill writes, "Of all the major Palestinian and Lebanese paramilitary groups sponsored by Damascus, the PFLP-GC exercises the least strategic and operational autonomy."⁴ In addition, Adam Dolnik has noted the PFLP-GC has a "virtually unconditional allegiance to Syria." Dolnik adds, "The group's relationship with Syria was a key factor why Jibril never achieved the level of prominence that one might expect based on his military excellence and a touch for spectacular attacks."⁵

Since the 1980s, Jibril has also joined with Asad's primary Middle Eastern ally, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The PFLP-GC has fully adopted Iran's rhetoric regarding "armed

resistance” against Israel and may have cooperated with Tehran to assist Iran in pursuing regional and international goals.⁶ This has even led the group to adopt certain Islamist flourishes in its propaganda and to praise Iran.⁷

Over the decades, the PFLP-GC’s leader, Ahmad Jibril has exhibited no qualms with such arrangements or the adoption of new rhetorical narratives. Described by Palestinian foes as being emblematic of “Revolutionary nihilism,” Jibril’s lack of ideological attachments and willingness to please his sponsors have been the most important features within the PFLP-GC.⁸ For Jibril, popular acceptance by fellow Palestinians is of little concern. If anything, Jibril and his cohorts have understood that their route to power among Palestinians would only arise through accepting Asad’s suzerainty.

Jibril’s nearly umbilical link to first, the regime of Hafiz al-Asad and then to Bashar al-Asad is important when understanding his organization’s motives. His service in the Syrian army offers a partial explanation for his original closeness with Damascus. In 1961, prior to the formation of the PFLP-GC, Jibril had created the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). The group’s ranks were filled by Palestinians, who like Jibril, had served in the Syrian army.⁹ Hafiz al-Asad himself rose to power via the Syrian air force, and this historical military link has allowed the PFLP-GC to act as a supportive body for the Syrian military.¹⁰ With experience working with former Syrian military personnel, the PFLP-GC found itself as the perfect Palestinian entity with which the Syrian military could cooperate.

The group is also no stranger to intra-Palestinian fighting, especially when it was engaged in fighting at the behest of its Syrian backers. During what became known as the War of the Camps, a sub-war within the larger 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, the PFLP-GC and other anti-Yasir Arafat Palestinian factions attacked Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization.¹¹ In 1993, due to Arafat’s involvement in the peace process

with Israel, Jibril announced it would be acceptable to assassinate him.¹²

Despite the organization’s over four-decade-long war against Israel and its conflict with Lebanese and other Palestinian factions during and after the Lebanese Civil War, the Syrian Civil War has presented the PFLP-GC with its biggest challenge in its existence. Unlike the Lebanese Civil War, the Syrian Civil War has not allowed for the group to have a secure base. Instead the PFLP-GC is being attacked on all fronts; from its rural training bases in Lebanon’s Beq’a Valley, urban Palestinian refugee camps near Beirut, to the organization’s very own headquarters in Damascus. If anything, the PFLP-GC is fighting to survive against its existential foes. The group is also suffering from a number of internal splits and pitfalls, which have occurred due to leadership struggles, defections, and the age of its leaders.

THE PFLP-GC ENTERS THE SYRIAN FRAY AND THEIR DEFEAT IN YARMOUK

Set-up in the late 1950s, the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk represents the largest residence for Palestinians in Syria.¹³ Overtime, Yarmouk morphed from being a refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus to its current state of a more mixed urban district of southern Damascus. Around 150,000 Palestinians live in the refugee camp-cum-neighborhood.¹⁴ In addition to those Palestinian residents, the majority of Yarmouk’s inhabitants are actually Syrians.¹⁵

Since the spring of 2011, the strategically located area and has witnessed extreme tension between residents supportive of the Asad regime and his Palestinian and Syrian opposition.¹⁶ Many attacks that occurred inside Yarmouk specifically targeted the PFLP-GC and their supporters. The first major incident occurred in June of 2011, when the PFLP-GC’s Yarmouk headquarters was burned by protesters.¹⁷ The protesters accused the PFLP-GC of not properly organizing anti-Israel “Yawm al-Naqsa” (a day commemorating the 1967 defeat at the hands

of Israel) protests and of using Palestinians as pawns for the Asad regime.¹⁸ Soon after the PFLP-GC's building was burned, the group's militiamen opened fire on the protesters, killing 14 and wounding another 43.¹⁹ Conditions remained tense but relatively stable well into 2012.

Then, July 2012 saw a major surge in violence targeting pro-Asad Palestinian groups. 17 members of the Damascus-run Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) were kidnapped as they were travelling to Aleppo. The PLA members were later killed and only 13 of their bodies were found.²⁰ The pro-Hizballah newspaper, *al-Akhbar* asserted the kidnappings and killings of the PLA members marked the beginning of Palestinian involvement in the Syrian revolution.²¹

The lines in Yarmouk were not always so cleanly drawn between pro and anti-Asad actors. According to one activist, the Yarmouk camp originally had a neighborhood militia of 2,000 armed men. The group would fight "for the sake of civilians against both rebels and the Syrian army."²² As tensions between the pro-rebel elements, Syrian rebels, and pro-Asad residents--particularly those belonging to the PFLP-GC--a firmer polarization took hold.

According to anti-Asad activists, as early as August 2012, the PFLP-GC launched operations in Yarmouk in conjunction with the Syrian army.²³ These operations included another militia grouping created by the PFLP-GC around that time. Known as the Popular Committee-Yarmouk Refugee Camp (PC-YRC), the group presented itself as a communal militia for Yarmouk, with members from the neighborhood and close links to the Syrian government and the PFLP-GC. The group also created a Facebook Page, issued PFLP-GC statements, and claimed to have 12 independent "reporters" to cover events within Yarmouk.²⁴ According to Yarmouk residents and Fatah representatives, the PC-YRC was armed directly by the PFLP-GC.²⁵ In essence, it was little more than a PFLP-GC front with a specific geographic area of operations.

In August and September 2012, the PFLP-GC and their PC-YRC subgroup set up a number of checkpoints inside Yarmouk and

would actively engage Syrian rebels and pro-rebel Palestinians.²⁶ On September 7, 2012, the PC-YRC announced the loss of three members in engagements with Syrian rebels.²⁷ Rebel attacks against the PFLP-GC increased at the end of the summer into fall. In October 2012, Adel Hasan, a PFLP-GC leader, was assassinated by rebel forces in the southern Palestinian refugee camp in Dar'a.²⁸

With the increasing level of engagements, disagreements between pro-Asad and anti-Asad Palestinians had become so great that anti-Asad Palestinians joined with the Syrian rebels and created Liwa al-Asifah (The Storm Brigade). Reportedly, Liwa al-Asifah was comprised only of Palestinian recruits.²⁹ The group also received arms from Syrian rebel organizations.³⁰ One rebel commander was extremely blunt when discussing what would happen to the PFLP-GC when talking with Reuters: "Now they (the PFLP-GC fighters) are targets for us, targets for all the FSA. All of them with no exceptions."³¹ The PFLP-GC responded by saying Liwa Asifah was little more than a Qatari front and comprised of "terrorists."³²

On October 31, 2012, Syrian rebels exploded a car bomb, which killed a Syrian army commander. A rebel leader told Reuters the bomb was a, "gift to Jibril's people which will be followed by others"³³ Four days later, members of Liwa al-Asifah and the Free Syrian Army were recorded in Yarmouk proclaiming they would destroy any of "Jibril's Shabiha," Iranian, or Lebanese fighters aiding Bashar al-Asad.³⁴

The end of November 2012 witnessed a renewed rebel offensive, which saw the FSA strike at Damascus's suburbs and other major military installations.³⁵ The PFLP-GC soon became a key target not just for the FSA's Palestinian battalion but for the Syrian factions of the FSA. On November 23, 2012, a bomb ripped through a car in the Yarmouk camp, killing four and seriously wounding "senior official" Khalid Atteiq.³⁶ PFLP-GC spokesmen blamed the Free Syrian Army for the attack.³⁷ Rebel sources also announced the PFLP-GC had lost ten members in Yarmouk.³⁸

Later that month, rebels also captured a PFLP-GC training center near Douma.³⁹

Two days later, Rihaniyya, a major PFLP-GC encampment near Damascus, was also overrun by Syrian rebel forces. Liwa al-Asifah, Liwa Fursan al-Islam (The Knights of Islam Brigade), and Liwa Abi Musa al-Ash'ari (The Abi Musa Ash'ari Brigade) claimed they had taken the base during a joint operation after heavy fighting.⁴⁰

By December 17, 2012, the FSA announced PFLP-GC fighters and Ahmad Jibril had been pushed from Yarmouk.⁴¹ These claims also coincided with earlier rumors claiming Ahmad Jibril had fled to the Assad-controlled coastal city of Tartus.⁴² One FSA leader even claimed Jibril and a portion of the organization fled to Lebanon.⁴³ Interestingly, the Iranian media also reported that Jibril had fled Damascus.⁴⁴ The PFLP-GC later had to deny he had fled to Iran after being pushed out of Yarmouk.⁴⁵

Despite claims made by the PFLP-GC and the Syrian government, reports emerged that the Syrian army and PFLP-GC forces had been defeated inside the Yarmouk's environs.⁴⁶ On December 18, 2012, using Facebook, the PFLP-GC announced Yarmouk had been taken by, "Zionist enemy" and the "Zionist Mossad." In their statement, the group made no reference to Islamist groups backed by Gulf Arabs or the Free Syrian Army. General Command also vowed to crush "The Zionist enemy in the Yarmouk Camp."⁴⁷ At the same time of these announcements, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) expelled Ahmad Jibril and the PFLP-GC from their group.⁴⁸

In a belated attempt to reinforce the routed PFLP-GC units and possibly to punish Palestinian rebel supporters, the Syrian air force also launched strikes on the camp.⁴⁹ These skirmishes and raids were answered by the Syrian rebels with the reported assassination of PFLP-GC operations commander, Madal Elian.⁵⁰

Following the rebel conquest of central portions of Yarmouk, the PFLP-GC's website also went offline. The website only returned briefly for a few days in January and February.

In turn, this disrupted the group's issuing of statements and made them more reliant on social media and Syrian state media to convey their messages.⁵¹ By mid-March 2013, the site was again offline and as of August 2013, it has not come back online.⁵²

The fighting in Yarmouk was significant in its military costs. Numerous younger recruits and senior commanders were lost and demonstrated the PFLP-GC's fighting capacity was damaged. During the fighting, Nidhal Alani, an experienced PFLP-GC commander and member of the group's Central Committee was also killed.⁵³ The PFLP-GC later created a Facebook page claiming the creation of a military detachment named in his honor and a number of low-quality online videos as memorials.⁵⁴ However, it would appear the claims of a functional military group were little more than an attempt to make the group appear more capable and having larger numbers. By February 2013, one member of the PFLP-GC organized Popular Committees told the *Egypt Independent* that Jibril had "only several hundred armed men under his command" and that many had defected from the group.⁵⁵ According to one Palestinian activist in Yarmouk, there were "only [approximately] 80 of them [PFLP-GC militiamen] left."⁵⁶

Later in March 2013, Syrian rebels reportedly captured Ahmad Jibril's house. They claimed to discover orders to "kill Lebanese politicians." In addition, they said they found numerous "Arab and foreign" passports (mainly Jordanian), visa stamps, a printing machine they said was used to manufacture documents, and other secret documents.⁵⁷

Despite the defeat suffered by the PFLP-GC at the hands of rebel forces, the group managed to filter back into Yarmouk on a number of occasions throughout 2013. Nevertheless, the PFLP-GC's limited reestablishment within Yarmouk did not mean they could maintain complete control and the group continued to suffer losses at the hands of the rebels. In April, six PFLP-GC members were killed in Yarmouk. Syrian state-media

blamed the Syrian branch of al-Qa'ida, Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵⁸

When heavy fighting broke out in Yarmouk again, in July 2013, Iranian media claimed, "Palestinian volunteer fighters have been advancing into the camp slowly, facing the militants who have turned every building and every street into a bunker."⁵⁹ Later that month, it was reported that Syrian air force planes and artillery were sporadically dumping ordinance on Yarmouk, while the Syrian army and "allied Palestinian militiamen" attempted to advance into the area.⁶⁰ Pro-Asad media also claimed that it was the Popular Committees doing much of the fighting.⁶¹ On August 2, 2013, the PC-YRC announced further fighting had occurred in Yarmouk, yet gave few details.⁶² This and other pro-Asad reports implied a Palestinian-driven offensive against rebels. Simultaneously, this messaging strategy downplayed the increased role of the Syrian army in Yarmouk. Nevertheless, in reports about the fighting, direct mention of the PFLP-GC's presence was not presented. The rather slow advance of pro-Assad Palestinians and the Syrian army into Yarmouk also demonstrated a more blunted pro-Asad Palestinian force.

SPLINTERING THE SPLINTER

Splits within the PFLP-GC have been a constant since the group came into being. During the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the organization handled defectors violently, a tactic that has not changed. While the PFLP-GC's history has demonstrated that fissures do exist within the organization, they require the proper conditions to grow. As the group has become more involved in the Syrian Civil War, the conflict has provided the perfect incubator for further fractures.

In 1977, PFLP-GC members, led by Muhammad Zaydan, broke away from Jibril due to his support for Syrian military intervention in Lebanon. They later formed the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF).⁶³ Jibril would not entertain the existence of a fragment from his organization. A little over a year later, the PFLP-GC planted a massive

bomb in the PLF's Beirut headquarters. The explosion killed 200, including much of the PLF's leadership and fighters.⁶⁴

Leadership splits assisted in creating other incidents. Still, not all ended with violence. In 1990, the PFLP-GC's deputy secretary, Talal Naji, suggested the group reject Iranian support and rejoin with the Palestinian Liberation Organization.⁶⁵ While Naji's supporters were reportedly not attacked by Jibril, they were coopted by an agreement which, according to David Tal, stated, "Collaboration with Tehran would continue, yet Naji could veto political decisions that contradicted his views."⁶⁶ It is clear the agreement has held together since Naji has led PFLP-GC delegations which have met with Hizballah.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the experience with Naji is hardly a common form the PFLP-GC has dealt with internal fissures.

The Beirut assassination of Ahmad Jibril's son, Jihad Jibril in 2002, may have been one example of schismatic infighting. Jibril had commanded the PFLP-GC's forces in Lebanon and was a rising figure within the organization. The group accused Israel of orchestrating the killing.⁶⁸ Though, some security sources speculated he was killed due to "factionalism."⁶⁹

April 2010 saw another potential split occur within the PFLP-GC, when heavy fighting erupted in Lebanon's Beq'a Valley at a PFLP-GC base. It was reported that Ahmad Jibril dismissed a local leader of the group and his supporters were attacked by forces loyal to Jibril.⁷⁰ Following the fighting, the organization denied any conflicts took place.⁷¹ It was later claimed the dispute came as the result of a disagreement between Ahmad Jibril's son and politburo member Khalid Jibril and other PFLP-GC leaders in Lebanon.⁷²

In August 2012, as the PFLP-GC's involvement in the Syrian Civil War became more overt, a variety of splits threatened to rip pieces off of the group. Beirut's Palestinian refugee camp of Sabra saw what could be described as a fissure within the organization. One PFLP-GC member was killed in a dispute, likely with other PFLP-GC personnel.

Reasons for the dispute were not forthcoming and the PFLP-GC's leadership tried to calm tensions.⁷³ In the West Bank, the small PFLP-GC presence, led by Shawkat Hammad, warned it would split from Jibril if he did not adopt a neutral approach to the fighting in Syria.⁷⁴

According to the Ma'an News Agency, six PFLP-GC Central Committee members also resigned at that time to protest the organization's growing involvement in the Syrian Civil War.⁷⁵ By December 2012, it was reported that Adel al-Hakim, a PFLP-GC politburo member living in Gaza, had also left the organization.⁷⁶ The PFLP-GC's position among its members was shaken further in February 2013. Khalid Jibril, Ahmad Jibril's son, head of the PFLP-GC's "Special Units" and member of the PFLP-GC's politburo attempted to flee Syria and head to Gaza.⁷⁷

In the aftermath of the battle for Yarmouk, there were reports of mass-defections from the PFLP-GC. There were also unconfirmed claims an offshoot group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-Free Command (PFLP-FC), was created to show dissent from Jibril's pro-Asad stance.⁷⁸ Other evidence of this new organization included a video announcing its creation, which was released on the internet.⁷⁹ However, in the months following its creation, little was heard from the PFLP-FC. It is likely its members currently fight alongside other anti-Asad rebel elements. Nevertheless, one PFLP-GC source told *The Daily Star*, "Some of the younger fighters grew scared and wanted to leave [the PFLP-GC], but the older ones will never quit. They are experienced fighters and will stay to the end."⁸⁰

THE PFLP-GC, THE PALESTINIANS, AND THE LEBANON FRONT

Lebanon is a familiar arena for the PFLP-GC. Acting on the behalf of the Syrians, the group had engaged in countless fratricidal conflicts with other Palestinian groups throughout the 1980s, particularly during the so-called "War of the Camps."⁸¹ During Syria's occupation of Lebanon, the group

funneled weapons to Palestinian groups and launched rockets from Lebanese soil.⁸² When Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, the group would often ignite crises with the Lebanese army.⁸³ Unlike Lebanon, in Palestinian-dominated areas, such as Gaza and the West Bank, the PFLP-GC's presence is much less pronounced. As the war in Syria drew in Lebanese actors and conflict took place on Lebanese soil, the PFLP-GC found itself a target and attacker of pro-rebel elements. In Gaza and the West Bank, the PFLP-GC's limited effectiveness and presence made them into a target ripe for anti-Asad Palestinians.

Early rumors surrounding the PFLP-GC's activity in Lebanon reached a peak in October 2011. At the time, it was reported the group was "preparing for military operations inside the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp" located in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon.⁸⁴ Over a year later, as fighting raged in Damascus's Yarmouk, men armed with silenced weapons attacked the PFLP-GC's Ain al-Hilweh office.⁸⁵ In January 2013, Ain al-Hilweh made headlines again when pro-Syrian-rebel Sunni Islamist forces attacked the PFLP-GC's offices in the camp.⁸⁶ The camp exploded again in March as PFLP-GC and Sunni Islamists fought each other. First, a grenade was thrown at the group's office by the small Bilal Badr group. The situation then erupted into a firefight and 11 were injured during the fighting.⁸⁷ Even though the group's activities in neighboring Syria resulted in attacks and a further loss of influence in Palestinian camps, the PFLP-GC was still able to organize anniversary commemorations for their group's creation in northern Lebanon's Beddawi refugee camp.⁸⁸

PFLP-GC actions in Lebanon were not simply limited to urban zones. In November 2012, there were reports that the PFLP-GC had launched rockets in southern Lebanon, which subsequently landed in Lebanese villages.⁸⁹ Prominent Beq'a Valley Sunni leader, Shaykh Arfan al-Maarabouni, was reportedly kidnapped by the PFLP-GC. His disappearance spurred local Sunni leaders to

call on the Lebanese government to disarm the PFLP-GC camps in Lebanon.⁹⁰

At the beginning of 2013, reports from Lebanese outlets stated that Asad's forces, in conjunction with Hizballah continued to supply, arm, and assist in the maintenance of order within the PFLP-GC's Lebanon's strategically placed Shouf and Beq'a Valley bases.⁹¹ According to Voix du Liban Radio, in April 2013, the PFLP-GC used its Beq'a positions to launch rockets at Syrian rebels.⁹² On April 11, 2013, there were also reports of FSA-PFLP-GC clashes in the area of the key PFLP-GC Beq'a Valley base near Qusaya.⁹³

The PFLP-GC's power projection vis-à-vis forces in Lebanon was not restricted to just FSA elements. Following disagreements Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt had with Hizballah and his issuing of a number of public statements that did not sync with the official Asad line, the PFLP-GC once again made headlines in Lebanon.⁹⁴ It was reported that after a problematic meeting between Jumblatt and Syrian officials, PFLP-GC forces placed rockets on a strategic hill (Hill 888) in the Shouf, Jumblatt's geographic powerbase.⁹⁵ In June 2013, the PFLP-GC was blamed for the launch of a 122 mm rocket fired from the Shouf, which exploded in the Christian-dominated Keserwan.⁹⁶

Unlike Lebanon, the PFLP-GC's military apparatus in both Gaza and the West Bank, named the Jihad Jibril Brigades, is at best diminutive. From Gaza, the group claimed to have launched a number of mortar and rocket attacks and hit-and-run strikes on Israeli targets. Nevertheless, these attacks were at best sporadic.

Fighting in Syria and the group's loyalty to the Asad regime were well known among Palestinians. In Syria, the PFLP-GC was used as a foil against Hamas, which had quietly aligned itself away from the Asad regime.⁹⁷ As tensions between the Asad and Hamas grew, Mustafa Liddawi was kidnapped at a checkpoint in Yarmouk. Liddawi was a "former senior Hamas official" and was released from captivity two days later.⁹⁸

The PFLP-GC's attacks on HAMAS and other Palestinian groups did not come without

a cost. In Hamas-controlled Gaza, other small Palestinian leftist groups distanced themselves from General Command.⁹⁹ In March 2012, Fatah announced the PFLP-GC had attempted to assassinate Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. This led Fatah to declare Ahmad Jibril "a merchant for Palestinian and Arab blood." Political distancing was the least of the PFLP-GC's worries in Gaza and the West Bank. Muhammad Jibril, a "senior member" of the PFLP-GC in the West Bank, escaped a January 2013, assassination attempt by unknown gunmen.¹⁰⁰ Since PFLP-GC leaders had, "freely admitted that they lacked a significant presence in the West Bank and Gaza and had established links with Hamas in order to support the armed struggle in the region," their split with Hamas will certainly severely hinder the group's tiny force within Gaza and the West Bank.

MAINTAINING THE ASAD LINE: THE PFLP-GC'S NARRATIVE DURING THE CONFLICT

Despite fractures within the PFLP-GC, the group has stuck to the Asad line and has also forwarded the Iranian narrative when describing the reasons behind their involvement in the Syrian Civil War. This same messaging strategy has also been adopted when describing the PFLP-GC's foes. Hardly as effective in the field of public relations as its Hizballah ally, the organization's messaging strategy has continued to exhibit little independent thought from the Asad regime. Due to the perception that the group is little more than a proxy, General Command has attempted to show its main enemy is still Israel, and that the Syrian rebels are little more than "agents of Israel and NATO."¹⁰¹

During the heavy fighting of October and November 2012, Pro-PFLP-GC elements also started releasing videos on *YouTube*. These films promoted a mixture of ideas ranging from demonstrating the PFLP-GC were protecting the Yarmouk from "Terrorist aggression in the... camp" to reaffirming the group's armed-resistance bona fides against

Israel.¹⁰² Nevertheless, these video releases were of low-quality and few in number. In statements initially issued through the organization's website and later released on Facebook pages, the PFLP-GC repeated the well-worn Asad line that the conflict was little more than a foreign plot. Even with the potential to create a capable online propaganda network, the PFLP-GC's online messaging strategy lacked complexity and repeated, almost verbatim, the lines utilized by the Asad regime.¹⁰³

Since it was imperative for the group to appear less as an Asad proxy and still concentrated on core Palestinian issues, especially those dealing with Israel, the PFLP-GC continued its public support for anti-Israel positions. In January 2013, via the group's PC-YRC Facebook page, the PFLP-GC praised George Abdallah.¹⁰⁴ Abdallah, a Lebanese leftist who murdered an Israeli diplomat and U.S. military attaché in 1982, became a cause célèbre for Lebanese and Palestinian leftists after his parole was rejected by a French court.¹⁰⁵ Concern with Abdallah's situation was also mirrored by Iranian and Hizballah media outlets.¹⁰⁶ In what appeared to be a transparent attempt to take attention away from the heavy fighting in Yarmouk, the PFLP-GC claimed responsibility for a November 21, 2012, bombing of an Israeli bus in Tel Aviv.¹⁰⁷ The attack was actually orchestrated by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.¹⁰⁸ Following the May 2013 Israeli airstrikes on targets in Damascus, the PFLP-GC attempted to add weight to Asad's threats that he would retaliate and renew war with Israel in the Golan Heights. Widely pushed by Syrian government media, the PFLP-GC announced it would send units to fight the Israelis in the Golan.¹⁰⁹ However, the PFLP-GC stated that attacks against Israel could only be orchestrated after dealing with Syrian rebels.¹¹⁰ Demonstrating the Syrian regime's more public distance from Hamas, on Syrian TV, Jibril accused Hamas's Khalid Masha'l of going against Hamas's founding principles. Jibril also stated that "Turkey and Qatar are funding terrorists in Syria" and that "Money

from the Gulf is poisonous and only aims at containing [Palestinian aspirations]."¹¹¹

As the Syrian conflict became more overtly sectarian, Jibril's secular-nationalist bona fides were also utilized by the regime. On May 31, 2013, popular radical Sunni cleric Yusuf al-Qardawi called on Sunnis to attack Lebanese Hizballah and attack the Asad regime.¹¹² In response, Jibril called Qardawi "NATO's Mufti" and said his fatwas were "in line with the goals of the Zionists."¹¹³ It is probable this type of rhetoric will be used more often as the conflict morphs into a more Sunni-Shi'i type conflict.

On August 4, 2013, a small blow came to the PFLP-GC's internet outreach abilities. The group's PC-YRC Facebook page, their main social media and internet-based propaganda dissemination website, was taken down from Facebook.¹¹⁴ For the short-term, this will conceivably harm the group's propagation of material dealing with fighting going on in Yarmouk and other events involving General Command. Moreover, the PFLP-GC's potential outreach to more internet-savvy supporters has taken a hit with the page's removal.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE PFLP-GC

According to the Russian government-funded *Russia Today*, the PFLP-GC is now maintaining their headquarters "in a basement in central Damascus."¹¹⁵ For an organization, which at one point had been acting as Asad's feudal lord for Palestinians living in Syria, such a situation demonstrated the group's ignominious decline. However, based on examples presented by other regional state-sponsored Palestinian entities and on the PFLP-GC's history, there are a number of outcomes for the group in a post-Asad environment.

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein, Hussein's leading proxies withered and lost the rather small hold in Palestinian politics they had gained using state funding.¹¹⁶ Serving as archetypal

examples of post-regime collapse and organizational withering are the Arab Liberation Front (ALF) and Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). Both the PLF and ALF were used by Iraq to act as quasi-governing bodies for Palestinians within Iraq and functioned as little more than armed proxies doing Baghdad's bidding abroad.¹¹⁷ In a number of respects, this relationship mirrored Asad's use of the PFLP-GC as a coordinator for Palestinians located in Syria's 13 official and unofficial refugee camps.

Based on the PFLP-GC's need to have Syrian army assistance to maintain even tenuous control of territory, it is likely that post-Asad, the PFLP-GC will have little to no hold inside Palestinian areas within Syria. Furthermore, their influence in Lebanon may be reduced to their rural redoubts or urban camps where they have access to outside support.

However, unlike other Middle Eastern state-sponsored proxies, the PFLP-GC has not limited itself to just one backer. In a post-Asad atmosphere, Iran would likely attempt to salvage as many pro-Asad groups as possible and construct new relationships with them. Remnants of the PFLP-GC, especially in Lebanon, could also reach out to Tehran via Hizballah, with which there is already close cooperation.¹¹⁸ In the words of a former PFLP-GC militiaman, "They [Iran and Syria] are our allies with the same cause. We are all partners...Hizballah can be a good [future] partner [for closer cooperation]."¹¹⁹

The PFLP-GC's links with Iran have increased since the summer of 2012. Ahmad Jibril announced in July 2012, "We will fight alongside Iran and Hizballah" to aid Asad and he proclaimed the Iranians as "brothers."¹²⁰ In August 2012, in an effort to commemorate the Iranian created "al-Quds Day," the Iranians sent an "aid convoy" to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The convoy was met with extensive public praise from the PFLP-GC and signs of solidarity with Iran.¹²¹ In November of that year, the PFLP-GC's Lebanon representative Abu Imad Ramaz Mustafa said in one interview that the war in Syria was occurring due to a Western-Israeli war against Iran. He

added that because of Syria's "integration" with Iran and Iran's extensive regional influence, this was a prime reason for external forces to launch an attack.¹²² The group celebrated al-Quds Day again in August 2013. At the small rally, PFLP-GC's Husam Arafat said, "We thank Iran's people and [their] intelligent leadership." He then restated an Iranian talking point that Iran was a target of a "Zionist-U.S. project" due to its support for "resistance forces."¹²³

In the event of greater PFLP-GC-Iranian cooperation, the organization will probably live on in another form. According to Aaron Mannes, "As its relationship with Iran has deepened, the PFLP-GC has also adopted Islamist rhetoric."¹²⁴ With this type of established ideological pragmatism, the PFLP-GC could reform under a more Islamist guise. Albeit, this time, with increasing sectarianism (pitting Sunnis against Shi'i Iran) and the decline of "secular" Palestinian organizations, the group may suffer further membership losses.

While Iranian support could very well save the organization in either an interim or longer-term period, there are other problems with the PFLP-GC's membership. Of particular note is the age of many of the PFLP-GC's leaders. Ahmad Jibril, the group's leader, regarded as the face and mind behind the PFLP-GC, is a septuagenarian.¹²⁵ Other public members of the organization, such as Husam Arafat, are not military leaders and have only acted in a public relations format.¹²⁶

The loss of the older founding generation, whether through combat related deaths or simply old age, could prove highly detrimental. Older mid and high-ranking PFLP-GC commanders have been killed in the fighting in Syria. Ibrahim Salama, one of the group's founding members who was released from an Israeli prison during a 1979 prisoner swap, died in May 2013.¹²⁷ Since this older generation secured a very strict rule over the group, had more experience fighting Israel, and could claim leadership based on their history, their ongoing demise will leave a number of vacuums in the group.

Younger leaders who had stronger vested interests in continuing the group are also harder to find. The Syrian Civil War is taking its toll on the group's younger commanders and new recruits. Cases like the 2002 assassination of Ahmad Jibril's son, Jihad Jibril, then 41, also marked the loss of what could have been a new era for the PFLP-GC.¹²⁸ Jibril held extra legitimacy due to his family name and military experience. His vitality as a younger leader could have also bolstered the organization post-Ahmad Jibril.

CONCLUSION

Even though the PFLP-GC is suffering under the weight of war, which has led to a number of military defeats, membership losses, internal feuds, and a declining influence, the organization will likely persist. With Iranian involvement, a rump-group could very well live on in Lebanon. Nevertheless, this entity would be so reduced in power, it may be impossible for it to launch any effective offensive or defensive operations. Since Bashar al-Asad has continued to survive the fighting and has secured chunks of Syria, namely Damascus, coastal areas, and other urban zones, the PFLP-GC's role will probably remain the same as it did post-Yarmouk. The group may donate what remains of its fighting force to fight alongside Syrian army units, but with attrition, these deployments will become increasingly smaller in size.

Since neither the Syrian army nor the PFLP-GC has regained full-control of Syria's Palestinian refugee camps, the group may wither on the vine, becoming little more than a shell of an organization. A hollowed-out PFLP-GC will perhaps only find use carrying out small operations in Lebanon and parts of Syria, while playing an agitprop role to demonstrate Palestinian support for Bashar al-Asad.

Whatever the fate of the PFLP-GC's capacity to project force; the organization has hedged its bets on Asad and will continue moving closer to Iran.

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