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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

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Internal Politics of the Palestine Liberation Organization

Yasir Arafat's relatively moderate policies favoring Palestinian participation in Middle East peace negotiations have so far brought few tangible gains for the Palestinians. Radical fedayeen leaders have made much of this, with the result that Arafat recently has shown a heightened awareness of the need to protect his personal position and to prevent the erosion of Palestinian popular support in the direction of the radicals.

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Dissension Among the PLO's Constituent Groups

The policies promoted by Arafat and by his Fatah fedayeen organization are backed by the Syrian-controlled Saiqa group and by the Marxist-oriented Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Reduced to essentials, these policies include Palestinian participation in peace negotiations, the acceptance--for the present, at least--of a truncated Palestinian state limited to the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the rejection of international terrorism in favor of attacks on Israeli and Jordanian targets.

Opposition comes from the radical, independent Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine--which withdrew from the PLO Executive Committee last September--and the Popular Front

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for the Liberation of Palestine--General Command, from the Iraqi-controlled Arab Liberation Front, and from a variety of dissident fedayeen that operate outside the established commando organizations. Supported selectively by Libya and Iraq, these organizations and individuals cooperate in a loose way in the so-called Rejection Front.

The rejectionists condemn any Palestinian initiative to enter into talks with Israel, the US, or the moderate Arab states that favor a negotiated settlement. Instead, they advocate the continued use of terrorism as the only effective means of striking at Israel, the US, and Jordan. Rejectionists backed by Libya were responsible for the two recent attempts to shoot up Israeli civilian aircraft in Paris.

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PLO leaders are also taking pains to polish their activist image in order to detract from the appeal of the rejectionists. During the heavy fighting in southern Lebanon last month, for example, PLO propaganda organs made much of the claim that Arafat was personally commanding fedayeen forces. Similarly, Nayif Hawatmah, head of the Popular Democratic Front, has recently spoken out against Egypt's President Sadat for his willingness to accept a further Israeli withdrawal in the Sinai without simultaneous Israeli concessions to Syria and the Palestinians. In addition, Palestinian media throughout the Arab world have recently revived their attacks on Jordan's King Husayn. Such attacks had diminished for a short time following last month's meeting in Cairo of Faruq Qaddumi, head of the PLO political department, and the foreign ministers of Jordan, Egypt, and Syria.

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For now, these limited measures are likely to prove sufficient to prevent any significant erosion of support for Arafat or his policies. Arafat is unlikely to initiate any harsher disciplinary actions that could result in a military showdown with the radicals, at least until the Palestinians have received an invitation to attend the Geneva talks. Until that time, Arafat will consider that he might still be forced to return to a hard line policy, and will therefore be unwilling to sever completely his ties to the radicals.

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