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Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine Cooperation with European Anti-Israeli Networks: Freedom Flotilla Italia as a Case Study



Left: Banner calling for the release of Ahmed Saadat, PFLP secretary general, sentenced to 30 years imprisonment by Israel for his part in planning the assassination of Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze'evi in 2001. Right: The logo of the pro-Palestinian network Freedom Flotilla Italia. The picture headed an article about a conference held in Florence to report on the network's meetings in the Gaza Strip with PFLP activists (Freedom Flotilla Italia website, February 21, 2013).

Overview

1. In the campaign being waged to delegitimize Israel, the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)** has contacts with **pro-Palestinian and human rights networks in Western Europe, especially France and Italy**. Those contacts were recently revealed by **the participation of PFLP activists from Ramallah in meetings in France, as well as the meetings held by activists from Freedom Flotilla Italia (FFI), a pro-Palestinian network, with PFLP activists in the Gaza Strip**. Particularly conspicuous was **the trip to France made by Shawan Jabarin**, Jabarin is a PFLP activist. He also heads a Ramallah-based Palestinian human rights organization called Al-Hak, which plays an important role in the lawfare against Israel

(the Israeli Supreme Court has called Shawan Jabarin a "Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde," head of human rights organization and a PFLP activist).¹

2. The **PFLP**, a notorious terrorist organization, was established in December 1967 and headed by George Habash. Its ideology is a mixture of Marxism-Leninism and pan-Arab and Palestinian nationalism. **It was particularly active in the 1960s, carrying out a wave of terrorist attacks around the globe, focusing on hijacking Western and Israeli airplanes.** In **September 1970**, in a combined attack, the PFLP hijacked planes belonging to TWA, Swissair and Pan Am, forcing them to fly to Zarqa in Jordan (northeast of Amman, the Jordanian capital). An attempt to hijack an El Al plane as well failed. The hijackers blew up the planes, initiating the events of the so-called "Black September," which ended in July 1971 with the expulsion of the Palestinian terrorist operatives from Jordanian territory. The PFLP, along with a Japanese terrorist organization called the Japanese Red Army, was also responsible for the massacre at Israel's Lod Airport² on May 30, 1972, killing 26 and wounding 80. **The PFLP no longer carries out international terrorist attacks** but its operatives participate in the so-called "popular resistance" in the PA territories, in the campaign being waged to delegitimize Israel and in **on-going terrorist activities in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip**³ (a prominent PFLP terrorist attack was the assassination of Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze'evi at the Hyatt Hotel in Jerusalem on October 17, 2001).⁴

3. The above gives rise to **various questions: Why do pro-Palestinian activists and networks, including those calling themselves human rights organizations which claim to favor non-violence, collaborate with the PFLP, which has a long record of terrorist activities and had been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.** On what ideological and political platform do they collaborate, **beyond their well-known, deep hostility to Israel and the West?** Possible answers could be found a recent conference in Florence held by FFI, a pro-Palestinian Italian network participating the project of sending flotillas to the Gaza Strip. In our assessment, **insights concerning the links between the FFI and the PFLP**

¹ For further information see the February 17, 2013 bulletin "[Terrorism and human rights: Shawan Jabarin, human rights organization director and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine terrorist activist, recently visited France to participate in the anti-Israeli campaign.](#)"

² Since renamed Ben-Gurion International Airport.

³ Before Operation Pillar of Defense the PFLP's Ali Mustafa Brigades claimed responsibility for rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory.

⁴ The **Ali Mustafa Brigades**, the PFLP's military-terrorist wing, recently issued a statement saying that "the bullets which hit Rehavam Ze'evi in the head can also hit you in the head, because our weapons are not meant for military displays, they are aimed at your heads, and Palestine will be your graveyard" (Statement by a masked terrorist operative posted on YouTube, February 26, 2013).

gained from the meeting are also valid for some anti-Israeli networks throughout Western Europe (especially in France) which have ties to the PFLP.



Left: PFLP activist Abu Sami, identified as Omar Shhadeh, editor of the PFLP's organ Al-Hadef (Picture from the PFLP's official website). Right: Abu Sami, third from left, at a meeting in Toulouse. To his left is the PFLP logo (Picture from the ladepeche.fr website, December 9, 2012).

4. Resolutions and statements made at the conference in Florence indicate that FFI uses the terminology taken from the world of the European extreme left when dealing with the PFLP, **terminology that is unrealistic and irrelevant to the internal Palestinian arena in general and the political situation in the Gaza Strip in particular**. FFI relates to the PFLP as though it were a central organization of the "Palestinian left" fighting for "human rights," growing in strength and thus eventually capable of providing a "genuine alternative" to the authoritative, reactionary rule of political Islam (i.e., Hamas) in the Gaza Strip. **FFI does not ignore the PFLP's military-terrorist activities against Israel but shows "understanding" for its motives and even justifies them**. It claims (repeatedly) that given the "cruel Israeli occupation," armed attacks are permissible, and that the "sanctity of the ideal of non-violence may be good for our bleeding hearts, but it is a scenario which is unrealistic given the conditions of the cruel occupation."

5. Moreover FFI even shows **veiled criticism for pro-Palestinian activists** (participating in the campaign to delegitimize Israel) who "stress only nonviolent resistance" because it is "**better received in the West**." FFI is critical of the de-facto Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip not only for its Islamization of the civil society,

but for the limitations it puts on the activities of the terrorist organizations [the so-called "resistance"] operating in the Gaza Strip.

Contacts with the PFLP discussed at the FFI conference in Florence

6. **Freedom Flotilla Italia (FFI)** is a pro-Palestinian network, hostile to Israel, which **participates in the project to send flotillas to the Gaza Strip**. It grew out of the **radical left**, as did several of the other organizations leading the flotilla-convoy project (such as the International Solidarity Movement and the Free Gaza Movement). FFI activists participated in the (unsuccessful) June-July 2011 attempt to send an upgraded flotilla called Freedom Flotilla 2 to break through Israel's naval closure of the Gaza Strip. Recently, nine FFI activists accompanied the French-based pro-Palestinian organization EuroPalestine, which paid a visit to the Gaza Strip at the end of December 2012–beginning of January 2013. During their stay in the Gaza Strip (and also possibly when they were in Cairo) **they met with senior PFLP figures** who told them about the distress in the Gaza Strip and the challenges the PFLP faced there.

7. **On February 17, 2013, the FFI held a conference in Florence, Italy**. Various topics were discussed, the first of which was the meetings between FFI and PFLP activists in the Gaza Strip. One of the questions raised during the discussion was **whether the PFLP's armed activities should be supported**. The following are the main conclusions reached by the FFI activists who visited the Gaza Strip, **based on the meetings they held with PFLP activists** (according to a February 21, 2013 posting on the FFI Italian website):

1) The PFLP belongs to the "**Palestinian left**." FFI members said that during their visit to the Gaza Strip they identified "**an increase in the strength of Palestinian leftist forces**." The "Palestinian left," according to the FFI activists, was not only seeking Palestinian unity but could also **provide a genuine alternative to "the expansion of the influence of political Islam in the Gaza Strip"** [i.e., Hamas rule].

2) According to the members of the FFI delegation, **the source of the Islamization of the Gaza Strip was the corruption of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah**. The Islamists in the Gaza Strip, benefitting from the corruption, **created a broad infrastructure based on welfare services**, enjoying funding from the deep pockets of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is the Palestinian branch. The welfare services are also funded by **various Arab-Muslim countries, among them Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar**.

3) **The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas achieved following Operation Pillar of Defense is further proof of the institutionalization of Hamas as the ruling force in the Gaza Strip.** The PFLP activists claimed that the institutionalization led to "an intensifying of the control of Hamas, an Islamist movement, over the civil society of the Gaza Strip." **It was reminiscent, they said, of the methods used by the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt,** which had proved "authoritarian and reactionary."

4) PFLP activists complained that the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip **"limited the activities of the Palestinian resistance** [i.e., terrorist] **organizations in the Gaza Strip"** [i.e., the ceasefire achieved at the end of Operation Pillar of Defense limited the activities of the smaller terrorist organizations, the PFLP among them]. **That presented them with a "serious challenge"** [i.e., their military-terrorist activities against Israel have been prevented so far by Hamas' security forces].

5) PFLP activists praised the way **the Palestinian left fostered the "civil society infrastructure" in the Gaza Strip** (for example, the kindergartens and schools built by a pan-Arab organization and named for Ghassan Kanafani,⁵ and the Al-Awda Hospital in Jabaliya). Conference participants stressed the importance of the activities of the farmers', fishermen's and women's organizations which were "struggling against political Islam" [i.e., Hamas]. They also **stressed the importance of the PFLP's radio station in representing the leftist Palestinian organizations,** "whose struggle is extremely important in preserving the principles of human rights throughout the Middle East" [in our assessment a reference to **Sawt al-Shaab,** "the people's voice," the PFLP's Gaza Strip radio station].

6) The PFLP activists participating in the FFI conference spoke directly about the so-called **"armed resistance"** [i.e., terrorist attacks]. **They praised the activities of the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, the PFLP's military-terrorist wing.** They said the Brigades generally participated in coordinating the activities of the "resistance" [i.e., coordinating terrorist activities with Hamas], but they were politically and militarily independent. The PFLP activists also said that the **Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades maintained a high level of operational**

⁵ **Ghassan Kanafani** was a Palestinian writer and a PFLP activist. He was the organization's spokesman and edited its newspaper, Al-Hadef. A few days after the Lod Airport massacre a picture was published showing him in the company of a female Japanese terrorist. He was killed by a car bomb in Beirut on July 8, 1972 (Wikipedia).

preparedness despite the fact that they did to have the same resources as the armed groups of "political Islam" [i.e., Hamas].

Freedom Flotilla Italia's position regarding the "armed resistance"

8. Participants at the conference in Florence discussed **the question of the legitimacy of the "armed resistance"** (favored and supported by the PFLP) as opposed to the "nonviolent resistance" (vocally favored and supported by many of the organizations participating in the campaign to delegitimize Israel⁶). **A vote decision taken in favor of supporting the "armed resistance," accompanied by veiled criticism of the pro-Palestinian organizations which, because of tactical and image-related considerations, emphasize "nonviolent resistance."** Their ideological justification **was that Western activists, who enjoy lives of ease in democratic countries, "do not have the right to judge or approve the methods used in the struggles of people living under occupation or in danger of extinction."**

9. According to the resolutions voted on at the conference in Florence, **"the only reason that certain people emphasize nonviolent resistance exclusively is that it is received better in the West."** However, they claimed that "it was the almost complete disappearance of the armed resistance in recent years that led to the increase in Israeli settlements" [**Note:** The so-called "armed resistance" has in no way disappeared in recent years, rather it has shifted from suicide-bombing terrorism to rocket-launching terrorism]. Therefore, the conference decided that organizations and networks identifying with the Palestinians would allow them the full right to decide how to conduct their national struggle and would support them, "without falling into the trap of separating right from wrong." In summing up the conference, they decided that

⁶ The participants in the flotilla project, to which FFI belongs, have publicly and repeatedly stated that their methods are nonviolent and that they employ "passive resistance" when detained, and stress **the humanitarian nature of the flotillas** to gain the sympathy of world public opinion. However, in reality, they have often used **violent tactics**, which peaked during **the Mavi Marmara flotilla**. In addition, in internal forums senior members of the main organizations conducting the campaign to delegitimize Israel have expressed "understanding" and even support for the attacks carried out by armed Palestinian terrorist operatives. For example, during the second intifada, **Dr. Paul Larudee**, an ISM cofounder, said he fully understood the suicide bombers who were forced by desperation to carry out acts of "self defense." Another ISM cofounder, **Ms. Huwaida Arraf**, a prominent figure in the delegitimization organizations, said at an internal ISM workshop that the organization supported those involved in the armed "struggle" against Israel. For further information see the December 7, 2010 bulletin "The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) is a network founded by extreme American leftists and part of the campaign to delegitimize Israel..."

"sanctity of the ideal of non-violence may be good for our bleeding hearts, but it is a scenario which is unrealistic given the conditions of the cruel occupation."

Other issues discussed at the conference in Florence

10. The participants also voted to support the efforts of international activists operating in the Gaza Strip and the "rights of the Palestinian fishermen," as well as other initiatives to "protect" the local population. They also discussed building in school in the Gaza Strip and naming it after Vittorio Arrigoni,⁷ continuing preparations for the Gaza's Ark project (sailing a ship from the Gaza Strip to break the naval closure) and **the BDS campaign, to which FFI is a party** (on the agenda is a campaign to prevent the European Under-21 Football Championship from being held in Israel).

⁷ **Vittorio Arrigoni**, an Italian correspondent and human rights activists, was abducted in the Gaza Strip and murdered by a Salafist-jihadi network called Tawhid wal-Jihad on April 15, 2011. The abduction came to avenge the Hamas arrest of the organization's leader, Hisham Saidani. On February 23, 2013, a military court in the Gaza Strip accepted the appeal of two of his killers and reduced their sentence from life imprisonment to 15 years. At the appeal their lawyer, Muhammed Zaqut, claimed that they should only be accused of abduction, not murder (Agence France-Presse, February 19, 2013). Four human rights organizations operating in the Gaza Strip called on the military court to publish, as rapidly as possible, its considerations for reducing the sentence (Ma'an News Agency, February 20, 2013).