

The Abu Nidal Organization

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Abstract *In recent years, the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) has been politically marginalized. The current Gulf crisis may serve to reinvigorate the ANO as a significant actor in the Middle East. As an organization with its raison d'être rooted in violence, there is a paucity of literature concerning the ANO. It is, therefore, a useful exercise to collect and collate available information to construct a study of this organization.*

Keywords Nidal, ANO, terrorism, Palestinian radicals.

Introduction

Terrorist groups may be categorized on a spectrum of violence, yet little literature exists concerning the most violent organizations. Comprehending the nature of such groups is fundamental to understanding the full spectrum of subnational political violence we commonly call terrorism. This paper examines the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) as a prototype of the most violent terrorist organizations.

Organizations designated as terrorist are characterized by specific targeting of non-combatants to communicate political grievances. Nonetheless, there are gradations among such organizations. Some focus on diplomacy, some mix diplomacy and terror, and some focus on terror. The ANO is an example of the last type and is examined in this paper.

Origins

The genesis of the ANO is in Fatah. Abu Iyad, the Black September chief, was an early Abu Nidal patron in Fatah. Nidal, like Iyad, was associated with the Black September Organization (BSO).¹ His first major diplomatic assignment occurred in 1969 when he was to open Fatah's Khartoum office. Difficulties there prevented that opening, and Nidal was transferred to Baghdad. As Fatah representative in Baghdad, Nidal began organizing operations immediately upon his arrival and, with Fatah approval, the Iraqis assisted Nidal's efforts.² He soon became enamored with the Iraqis and compromised by Iraqi intelligence.³ Nidal subsequently argued for more systematic radicalization in Fatah. His initial following was among resident Palestinian students in Iraq.⁴ This core was nourished by Nidal's financial support of the students⁵ and was sustained by family ties.⁶

Another element of the incipient ANO were cadres from the National Arab Youth for the Liberation of Palestine (NAYLP). The NAYLP was led by one Ahmed al-Ghafour (Abu Mahmoud). Paralleling Nidal's rejection of the use of diplomatic tactics by the

Fatah leadership, the NAYLP executed several operations in the early 1970s, which caused significant loss of American life. Owing in part to resulting diplomatic damage, Fatah sentenced al-Ghafour to death in absentia. A Fatah team managed to track down and execute al-Ghafour in Beirut. The remnants of his organization then made their way to Baghdad, where many of them linked up with the ANO.⁷

The embryonic Nidal organization flourished in Iraq. Initially, the ANO built a data base of Western publications. ANO staff used these both to monitor Western political developments and track business and political leaders. Some businessmen who traveled to the Middle East were subsequently kidnapped for ransom, which formed the seedbed of independent financing for the organization.⁸

The formal split between Nidal and his followers with Fatah occurred in October 1974. During that month, a Fatah revolutionary court sentenced Nidal to death in absentia on charges of attempting to mount armed insurrection within Fatah and conspiring to assassinate Fatah officials.⁹

The Fatah death sentence precipitated Nidal's overt efforts to establish a competing organization. Nidal argued that his new faction was the "authentic" Fatah, and included the aforementioned Palestinian students resident in Iraq and cadres from three other sources. These were dissidents from al-Asifah (a Fatah commando organization), loyalists of the Fatah renegade Ahmad al-Ghafour, and some elements of the Palestinian Liberation Army's Qadisiyah Brigade (normally based in Iraq).¹⁰

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the Fatah-ANO split, Nidal retained secret contact with senior Fatah officials.¹¹ Furthermore, while maturing over the years, Nidal's organization changed paymasters several times. It has, sequentially, contracted with the Iraqis, the Syrians, and the Libyans.¹² In 1990, the Gulf crisis resulted in the ANO coming full circle with its reestablishment in Iraq.¹³

Organizational Structure

In examining the ANO, it is useful to begin with its financial structure. Financially, the ANO demonstrates reasonable management skills and access to resources. Major sources of ANO financing have included commercial operations, government subsidies (from Libya, Syria, and Iraq), and blackmail.¹⁴ An account of commercial operations in Eastern Europe came to light in 1988.¹⁵

These commercial operations flourished in Eastern Europe prior to the democratic revolutions of 1989. In Warsaw, for example, a senior ANO financial adviser (Samir Najm al-Din) was responsible for SAS Trade and Investment. The basic operation of SAS was sales brokerage. Arms and other goods were traded between various governments (primarily between East Germany and Poland and Iran and Iraq). SAS would broker the sale and accept a commission on the same. In turn, SAS acted as an administrative center for several ANO front companies in Europe.¹⁶ Other front companies also surfaced. A report from London noted that the London branch of the Bank of International Credit and Commerce (BCCI) was responsible for three front companies that moved money for the ANO.¹⁷ If Poland and London have proved amenable to ANO financing, other areas of Europe have not. Samir Najm al-Din, the organization's chief financier in Europe, disappeared in Switzerland in the summer of 1988—almost simultaneously with the breaking Polish story. Subsequently, the ANO kidnapped Swiss Red Cross workers in response to Najm al-Din's disappearance. It seems unlikely, therefore, that his disappearance was arranged under ANO auspices.¹⁸

Subsidies from various governments have also been important sources of ANO fund-

ing over the years. The ANO operated, in the mid- to late 1970s, on a budget of about U.S. \$10 million a year, which was supplied by the Iraqis.¹⁹ By the late 1980s, the ANO was estimated to control “. . . tens of millions of dollars.”²⁰ Livingstone noted that much of this was in the form of an annual Libyan subsidy approaching U.S. \$15 million, which constituted the bulk of the \$20 million late-1980s budget.²¹ It might be surmised that, with Nidal's return to Baghdad after falling out with the Libyans, Iraq was now paying the bills.

The role of blackmail is more problematic, although it is probably applicable to ANO actions against commercial companies and governments as well as individuals. Contributions to the Palestinian cause provide one with some political “fire insurance.”

Conceptually, the ANO has been described as a staff of experienced agents insulated from, yet supplemented by, a stream of expendable recruits.²² The hard-core staff numbered, prior to the Autumn 1989 purge, about 400 officials organized into cells that were scattered throughout the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.²³ The current Gulf crisis may precipitate activation of many such cells.²⁴

Elements of these cells are found among some student populations. Significant numbers of Nidal cadres, according to Ariel Merari of the Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv, pose as students in European universities.²⁵ Beyond Europe, centers of Nidal covert student organizations exist in Britain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Pakistan; there are also ANO functionaries in Algeria, France, and Belgium.²⁶

The ANO's Lebanese base of operations during the late 1980s was near Tripoli (Lebanon).²⁷ The ANO had camps in places as disparate as the regions of Yanta (in the Bekaa valley), Hamara (once the Syrian-Lebanese border), and within a Syrian military installation at Nabi Zahour.²⁸ The late 1980s saw Lebanon serving as the ANO's main training venue with command structures in both Lebanon and Libya, although events in 1989 and 1990 altered the situation.²⁹

With the onset of the Gulf crisis, the focus of ANO command structures were transferred to Iraq. The dramatic increase in Syrian influence in Lebanon, accomplished with the diversion of the Gulf crisis, can be expected to diminish the viability of ANO training facilities in Lebanon. The construction of additional training facilities may be expected in Iraq. The transfer of operational personnel from Lebanon to Iraq may be affected through the good offices of the Jordanians.

ANO operations function on the basis of cells. Individual cells are often congruous with family or clan ties, or both, which allow significant operational security via simplified vetting procedures.³⁰ Such cells generally consist of three to seven persons,³¹ and communication among cells is maintained with courier networks.³²

A Central Committee serves as a basic ANO decisionmaking body. Its membership is partially elected and partially appointed by a politburo. Al-Banna controls the politburo and uses it as a mechanism to run the ANO. The politburo was constituted in 1985 with 10 members. Theoretically, it administers daily operations and executes Nidal's decrees.³³ The 1989 purge, however, shattered any pretense of independent decisionmaking within the politburo. An ancillary ANO body, the “Revolutionary Council,” involves about 40 people who administer ideological matters.³⁴ In the aftermath of 1989, the Revolutionary Council was also reduced to pious servitude.

Organizationally, the ANO is a binary structure with a political and a military apparatus.³⁵ The ANO is constituted to mirror the original organization of Fatah. The U.S. State Department has noted six separate functional departments. These include the following:

During the late 1980s, Lebanon was the most important venue for ANO operational facilities.⁴³ The most important operational site was then located near Tripoli (Lebanon) outside the zone of immediate Syrian control.⁴⁴ In 1987, about 300 ANO fighters were based in Lebanon.⁴⁵

The ANOs activities in Lebanon in 1987 indicated continuing Syrian ties.⁴⁶ As late as 1989, the Syrians continued assistance to ANO personnel in Lebanon. In the spring of that year, the Syrians provided Lebanese identity cards, UNRWA identity cards, and Lebanese passports to the ANO.⁴⁷

In the late 1980s, the ANO expanded its manpower base. In 1987, it sought arms on the black market to supply about 1500 men. Concurrently, it attempted to establish itself in southern Lebanon and open relations with Hizbollah there, although its main base of operations was north of Tripoli, Lebanon.⁴⁸ In 1988, ANO camps opened in the Bekaa valley and, combined with its men near Tripoli, the ANO approached 1000 men under arms.⁴⁹ Evidence of possible operational cooperation with Hizbollah surfaced after an attack in Khartoum on May 15, 1988.⁵⁰ The attack was later acknowledged as an ANO operation. The attackers, however, carried Lebanese passports with Shi'a names. One of the attackers was later found to be from a family with Hizbollah members.⁵¹ However, with Syria's initial support for the anti-Saddam alliance and increasing Syrian influence in Lebanon, the ANO may experience decreasing operational flexibility in the Lebanese venue.

Although the ANO historically shunned close cooperation with other terrorist groups for security reasons, associations do exist. It was revealed in 1986 that the Marxist Kurdish Workers Party (MKWP) provided safe houses for ANO personnel over the preceding years. The MKWP has maintained cells in Germany, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, and France.⁵² The ANO has further cooperated with Action Directe in France⁵³ and maintained weapons caches as far away as Pakistan.⁵⁴

Relations with a variety of extremist groups serve the ANO in two ways. First, it facilitates the seemingly easy movement of the ANO across hostile political frontiers (e.g., between Iraq and Syria by providing an insurance policy of sorts). Second, Nidal is said to want to create a "dynamic of terror" in the Middle East. This dynamic would consist of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations cooperating to destabilize the entire state system in the region.⁵⁵ The current Gulf crisis may provide an environment that facilitates such a dynamic, considering the consequences of outside intervention and the fragility of the existing state system.

Conclusions

In the autumn of 1989, there was a purge that again marginalized the ANO as a political actor. The origins of the purge appear in prompting by elements of the leadership to incorporate diplomacy into their activities.⁵⁶ The ensuing bloodbath resulted in the deaths of between 150 and 300 ANO cadres.⁵⁷ Liquidation of dissident elements of the leadership (numbering in the dozens) was concentrated in Libya; most of the other killings occurred in Lebanon.⁵⁸ One consequence of that purge was serious friction with Qaddafi in Libya,⁵⁹ which caused Nidal to consider moving his command structure to Iran; the Gulf crisis eventually precipitated his actual move to Baghdad.⁶⁰

Politics requires nonviolent, as well as violent, communications. Consequently, the ANO is further marginalized as a political actor. Yet, the current Gulf crisis may reinvigorate the ANO as a regional actor. As the conflict plays out, however, the ANO simultaneously serves its own and Baghdad's interest in threatening Western and conservative

Arab targets, which may result in its political rehabilitation among Palestinian moderates and the more radicalized Arab masses.

Notes

1. Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), p. 286.
2. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 5, 1986.
3. Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism*, p. 286.
4. This initial cadre numbered about 200 persons according to Laqueur in *The Age of Terrorism*, p. 286.
5. Ibid.
6. Family ties are important to understanding Middle East politics generally and terrorist politics in particular. A general rule of thumb, noted by Laqueur in *The Age of Terrorism*, is the smaller the group the more important its clan politics. This is seen in Hizbollah factions (e.g., the Musawi clan), certain other Lebanese factions (e.g., the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction [Abdallah clan]), and some of Nidal's operations (e.g., Hindawi brothers).
7. Christopher Dobson and Ronald Payne, *The Never-Ending War* (New York and Oxford: Facts on File Publications, 1987), pp. 230-231.
8. *U.S. News and World Report*, January 13, 1986, p. 31.
9. Defense Intelligence Agency *International Terrorism: A Compendium Volume II—Middle East* (Tehran Embassy 1979), p. 94.
10. Ibid.
11. *Foreign Report*, June 4, 1985, p. 7. As reported by Melman, Nidal's command structure is made up of four individuals. These are Mustafa Merad (reported killed in 1989 purge), Ghasan al-Ali, Muhammad Wasfi Hannon, and Abd al-Rahman Isa (until recently). *TVI Profile* notes this further information: Aataf Abu-Bakr was Nidal's deputy and the official spokesman for the organization (until his defection in 1989). Samir Najim al-Din is the director of the ANO's financial activities (until his disappearance in Switzerland in the summer of 1988). Ghasan al-Ali is the chief ideologist. Walid Halad is a organization spokesman and chief of foreign relations. Individual known as Hisnam is some sort of operations chief. *TVI Report* 8, no. 3 (1989): 5.
12. *Washington Times*, January 1, 1986.
13. *Washington Post* (National Weekly Editor, September 17-23, 1990), p. 16.
14. *New York Times*, November 28, 1989, p. 6.
15. The account was based on a State Department document, which, in turn, was based on a Central Intelligence Agency report that used an ANO informant (possibly provided through the good offices of the Jordanians). *New York Times*, January 25, 1988.
16. *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 1987, p. 24.
17. *Intelligence Newsletter*, April 26, 1989, p. 5. It might also be noted that the BCCI in Florida has been accused of co-mingling accounts of Contra rebels and cocaine traders.
18. *Intelligence Newsletter*, February 1, 1989, p. 7.
19. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 5, 1986.
20. *New York Times*, November 12, 1989, p. 26. In addition Abu Bakr noted in the *Washington Post*, November 20, 1989 that the funds existed in four bank accounts—three in Switzerland and one in Austria. A report in the *New York Times*, November 28, 1989 estimated the total amount of funds under ANO control up to \$200 million.
21. Neil C. Livingston and David Halevy, *Inside the PLO* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), p. 243.
22. *Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 1986, p. 15.
23. *New York Times*, November 28, 1989, p. 6.
24. This activation may provide unusual collection opportunities for Western and other services further illuminating ANO organizational structure.

25. Ibid. It would appear, however, that these "sleepers" merely facilitate operations. Their professional utility is limited.
26. DIA *International Terrorism Compendium*, pp. 95 and 97.
27. *Foreign Report*, April 30, 1987, p. 5.
28. Livingstone and Halevy, *Inside The PLO*, p. 242.
29. *New York Times*, November 12, 1989, p. 26.
30. Yossi Melman, *The Master Terrorist: The True Story of Abu-Nidal* (New York: Avon Books, 1986), p. 80.
31. Ibid., 83.
32. Ibid. Most effective terrorist organizations use couriers to send messages. Any communication that uses an electronic medium can theoretically be intercepted. The smaller organizations in particular cannot put the resources into encryption devices secure against the resources of the major services. Using couriers is, therefore, their only safe means of communications.
33. United States Department of State *Abu Nidal Organization* (February 1989), p. 4.
34. Ibid.
35. Melman, *The Master Terrorist*, pp. 90-91.
36. State Department *Abu Nidal Organization*, pp. 5-6.
37. DIA, *International Terrorism Compendium*, p. 96.
38. DIA, *International Terrorism Compendium*, p. 95.
39. According to Melman, an aide to Nidal, one Shafiq al-Arida, established liaison with Libya through Naji Alush, a former member of the ANO. Alush had an excellent relationship with Abdallah Hijazi, Abdallah Sanusi, and Salim abu Sharukai the three lieutenant colonels who ran the Libyan intelligence services in the mid 1980s. This according to Melman, *The Master Terrorist*, p. 124.
40. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 5, 1986.
41. This is always a close call, the ANO is also currently cooperating with the Syrians and opening relations with the Iranians.
42. *Defense and Foreign Affairs Weekly*, May 8-14, 1989, p. 6.
43. *New York Times*, September 13, 1986.
44. *Foreign Report*, April 30, 1987, p. 5. It might also be noted that this same source indicated that the ANO may have been penetrated by Jordanian intelligence, since one of the ANOs senior members, Abdhul Rahman, had surfaced in Amman.
45. Ibid. This would change significantly by 1988.
46. For example, the ANO seized a pleasure yacht in the eastern Mediterranean in November 1987. The ANO claimed some of the passengers were Mossad operatives from France and Belgium. An ANO spokesman, Walid Khaled, held a press conference concerning the matter in Beirut. The conference was in a building housing some offices of Syrian military intelligence. If the Syrians had, in fact, cut ties with the ANO, it is unlikely they would allow ANO press conferences in buildings they used for official purposes. This was reported in the *Washington Times*, December 28, 1987.
47. *Intelligence Newsletter*, April 26, 1989, p. 8.
48. *Washington Times*, December 28, 1987, p. A9.
49. *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 1988, p. 32.
50. It might be noted here that folks always try to play games. There is a small, but quite effective, Palestinian group that calls itself 15 May Organization. Because this attack in the Sudan occurred on that date, the Palestinian faction is the first one investigators would look at, buying the ANO some time.
51. *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 1988, p. 32. Having noted the importance of clan politics to the smaller organizations if family members are involved in one organization, it greatly increases the probability of further clan involvement.
52. *Foreign Report*, December 10, 1987, p. 4.
53. Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism*, p. 287.
54. *New York Times*, September 13, 1986.

55. *Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 1986, p. 15.
56. *New York Times*, November 12, 1989, p. 26.
57. *New York Times*, November 28, 1989, p. 20.
58. *Washington Times*, November 29, 1989.
59. *New York Times*, November 28, 1989, p. 1.
60. *Washington Times*, November 29, 1989.