# Strategy, Unity, and Coercion:
# Lessons from Four Books on the Palestinian Struggle

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## 1    Introduction

The Palestinian issue is one of the most pressing moral quandaries and intractable political crises of our time. As activists work to challenge the status quo, scholars should be urgently yet meticulously poring over the collective experiences of this national movement and other national movements in the Mediterranean region, recovering practical lessons from their past failures and successes. In this review essay we survey four superb recent works of scholarship that attempt to do this. Together the books constitute an important, original contribution of archival and interview research conducted in at least six countries across four continents. We present each book's core findings and strengths, identifying avenues of further research for the authors and broader scholarly community.

## 2    Coercion: The Only Language They Understand

In his classic treatise on conflict, Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling observes that "the power to hurt – the sheer unacquisitive, unproductive power to destroy things that somebody treasures, to inflict pain and grief – is a kind of bargaining power" (Schelling (1966)). To inflict harm upon a state adversary, a non-state actor (the Palestinian national movement) may choose to employ tactics such as boycotts, divestment, sanctions, labor strikes, or militant operations. But no matter which tactic is employed, and whether non-violent or violent, the strategic purpose remains exactly the same: to signal the actor's (1) *capacity* and (2)

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*commitment* to inflict unacceptable harm on the state unless it concedes to the actor's demands. Short of all-out war, coercive actions such as these can therefore be interpreted fundamentally as diplomatic messaging or signaling. In the real world of politics where talk is cheap and dissembling pervasive, harmful actions (and the threat of further harm they implicitly convey) are the most credible language by which states and non-state actors can communicate.

Nathan Thrall's *The Only Language They Understand* (2017) empirically validates Schelling in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. With intimate knowledge of the conflict's history, Thrall leads his readers through a remarkably even-handed tour of each diplomatic juncture since the 1950s to the end of 2016, showing convincingly that both Israelis and Palestinians have repeatedly compromised only in the face of credible threats. Eisenhower and Carter both advanced Israeli-Arab peace, Thrall argues, by being willing to condition aid to Israel on diplomatic compliance. Meanwhile, the erosion of the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) negotiating position after its defeat in Lebanon, and the First Intifada's costliness to Israel, pushed both parties to the table at Oslo. Though other authors have voiced such interpretations before, Thrall masterfully synthesizes all of these facts and analyses into one consistent, compelling argument that coercion, not clever diplomatic maneuvers, drove all of the concessions on both sides. For post-2007, there are few existing accounts of the conflict's history, and here Thrall's clear-eyed assessment compares favorably even to Kurtzer et al. (2012). His analysis of Fayyadism's collapse, the PA's subsequent leadership paralysis, and the Obama administration's failed diplomatic efforts is the best available for readers.

One challenge the book faces is locating a target audience. Thrall repeatedly proves that Israeli, Palestinian, and other Arab leaders already agree with his thesis. So instead he searches for his audience among third-party leaders, especially those in the White House and US State Department. Whether it makes sense to target this audience hinges upon how one views their disposition. Thrall seems to agree with Martin Indyk that "hope and optimism are critical components of the innocence that is the hallmark of America's engagement with the Middle East." If this benign characterization holds, then Thrall's book will be a rude awakening for US policymakers. The overwhelming preponderance of evidence, however, points to the exact opposite characterization. As the British historically propped up the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, so the United States has supported the Egyptian

military dictatorship and armed the Saudi regime, all at the expense of Arab citizens' democratic aspirations (Yom (2015); Brownlee (2012)). After Hamas' electoral victory in 2006, sanctions imposed on Palestinians by the Quartet (US, EU, UN, and Russia) and subsequent aid flows and security force assistance to the Fayyad/Abbas administration (2007-2013) were precisely intended to overthrow a democratically elected Palestinian government and supplant it with one amenable to Quartet principles (Jamal (2012)). So US policymakers are not naïve; they are quite strategic and intentional. They understand realpolitik very well, and for various reasons favor Israel and advocate for US policies that benefit Israel. Part of that exercise involves misleading others with phrases like 'two-state solution' and related narratives that Thrall ably debunks. But what they say on record is a poor indicator of what they really know or think.

For all four books under review here, and for the broader literature on the Palestinian struggle, I would argue the audience most likely to learn from and apply new research findings is the non-state movement leadership, such as but not limited to leaders of the Palestinian Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) movement. Compared to states, activists are resource-constrained and operate relatively more in the dark. New research results may therefore come as a greater surprise to them and may have a greater tangible impact on their behavior. In this regard, I encourage researchers to mirror the counter-terrorism literature (see Berman and Matanock (2015) for a recent survey). Compared to the social movements literature, which has so far largely missed its opportunity to supply practitioners with useful, actionable knowledge, the counter-terrorism literature is keenly aware that findings published today may be applied as policy in the field tomorrow. Researchers of the Palestinian struggle should take a similar attitude, prioritizing questions that lie at the intersection of usefulness to both academics and activists. They should pursue a detail-oriented, positive agenda that takes an unsentimental look at past failures and successes and informs the Palestinian movement on what works and what does not.

# 3 Violence or Non-violence? The Elusive Luxury of Strategic Choice

Taking Schelling's theory and Thrall's evidence as a basic premise ("coercion works"), numerous questions of both practical and academic value immediately arise. Firstly, what methods of coercion adopted by a national movement are more efficient in extorting political

concessions from state adversaries? For example, what does history say about the efficacy of violent versus non-violent tactics in the Palestinian struggle, and in related nationalist struggles in other countries of the Mediterranean? Under what circumstances does one tactic outperform the other? And what internal organizational structures should the movement adopt in order to facilitate violent or non-violent actions? Wendy Pearlman's *Violence, Non-Violence, and the Palestinian National Movement* (2014) is a thoroughly researched and illuminating study that raises all of these major questions (not always deliberately), and actually goes a fair distance to answering all of them (sometimes unintentionally). Along the way, Pearlman quietly asserts a framing that ought to become mainstream in the near future: for any social movement, non-violent and violent actions are different tactics towards the same political end. As such, the literature on social movements and the conflict literature on rebellions should converge into one.

Reviewing the history of the Palestinian national movement from its pre-mandate inception until the end of the Second Intifada, Pearlman shows time and again that the movement's organizational structure dictated strategic decisions. "It is the capacity for internal command and control," she writes, "that enables a composite social actor to act as if it were a unitary one." But Pearlman shows that internal fragmentation – rather than cohesion – has dogged the Palestinian movement since its earliest days. The result has been repeated, catastrophic strategic failure. In the Arab revolt of the late 1930s, a longstanding rivalry between the Nashashibi and Husayni families, along with urban-rural social divisions in Palestinian society, provoked counterproductive acts of violence against the British, inviting repression and defeat. In the 1960s and 1970s, Palestinian militant factions seeking to outbid each other for recruits and funding launched ill-advised cross-border attacks against Israel, provoking Israeli reprisals that precipitated the disastrous 1967 war, and later the PLO's disastrous ejection from Jordan in 1970-71. Fragmentation later drew PLO factions into the Lebanese civil war and provoked Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1978 and 1981. In the 1990s, fragmentation between the PLO and Islamist groups tempted the latter to spoil the former's fragile peace process. Had the movement solved its internal divisions, Pearlman concludes, it could have operated as a unitary actor, pursuing strategically optimal actions at the right times and places.

Pearlman then develops a follow-on claim: movement fragmentation gives rise to violence, and so non-violent tactics are impossible to sustain without unity. Non-violent actions like

boycotts or strikes, for example, are only effective if the population is mobilized to participate *en masse*. When the movement is fragmented, mass mobilization is hard or impossible, but small groups can still achieve outsize impacts through violence. Moreover, by spectacular acts of violence (such as PFLP's air hijackings in the early 1970s), groups can compete with other groups for funding and recruits; and by spoiler violence, groups can undermine other groups' peace deals. So through multiple channels, fragmentation incentivizes violence. Pearlman effectively documents how unified non-violent action gave way to fragmentation and violence in the Arab Revolt (1936-39) and the First Intifada (1987-1991). Theory and evidence therefore point to fragmentation as being particularly problematic for movements for whom non-violence is strategically optimal.

Buried in Pearlman's text, however, is the related, crucial finding that non-violent coercion has never really been strategically optimal for Palestinians. Pearlman explains how the initially unified, non-violent civil disobedience tactics of the Arab revolt of 1936 were flatly ignored by the British occupation. Evidently the economic harm such actions inflicted was not grievous enough to elicit concessions. As the public grew disillusioned and lost their sense of collective purpose, fragmentation set in, giving way to violence and strategic failure. Similarly, Pearlman documents how the First Intifada remained unified and relatively non-violent for two solid years, but achieved no concessions from the Israeli occupation. Indeed, Pearlman's narration of the First Intifada is nuanced and novel in this regard. Whereas a generation of Palestinians nostalgically recalls the First Intifada as a unified undertaking that directly led to the Madrid Talks (1991), Pearlman suggests mass disillusionment and violent fragmentation set in after the first two years, significantly pre-dating the Talks. At the same time, the Soviet Union collapsed, with all that this implied for changing American attitudes and jeopardizing the PLO's future patronage. Iraqi scud missile attacks turned Israel's attention to threats "over the horizon," while the PLO suffered a disastrous loss of support from the Gulf after recklessly backing Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. All these external factors may have had as much or more to do with achieving the Madrid Talks as non-violent grassroots action in 1988-89. Moreover, the Madrid Talks were a rather underwhelming accomplishment: even after all that had transpired, Israel was still not so grievously harmed as to be ready to make significant concessions. In the end, the First Intifada, with the help of external factors, achieved nothing more than Oslo. If we accept Thrall's thesis that only by coercion can Palestinians win concessions, then Pearlman's evidence sharpens the claim: only by violence can Palestinians win concessions.

# 4 Hegemony: the Secret to Success for National Movements

In *Rebel Power* (2017), Peter Krause is not satisfied merely with Pearlman's insistence that the movement achieve organizational unity; he demands hegemony. Whereas unity within a national movement may imply nothing more than a dubious alliance between a leader group (like Fatah) and "challenger" groups (like Hamas or, historically, PFLP), hegemony implies that the leader group's strength significantly outweighs that of all the others, so that challenging the hegemon's status is futile. The ensuing absence of counterproductive internal competition allows the movement to act as a strategic, unitary actor focused on fighting external adversaries. Drawing on evidence from the Irish, Algerian, Zionist, and Palestinian national movements, Krause argues that Algerians and Zionists achieved their goals only after their movements hegemonized, while the Palestinians and Irish have fallen short of their goals in no small part because of their failure to hegemonize.

The claim that competition plays such a counterproductive role in national movements should come as a surprise to readers given its productive role in many other circumstances of politics and economics. In a market economy, competition between businesses is precisely what bids down prices and raises quality of service, all to the benefit of consumers. In a healthy democracy, electoral competition is precisely what incentivizes incumbent parties to serve citizens more effectively. So why does this logic not apply to the case of national movements? Both Pearlman and Krause document perverse effects of competition: chain-ganging, spoiling, etc. But in a democracy, could not the incumbent party's good policies be maliciously spoiled by the political opposition? Could not opposition politicians be chain-ganged into supporting suboptimal policies by the incumbent? And yet our solution is not to discard democracy in favor of autocracy, but rather to foster mechanisms that minimize perverse tendencies. Why not take the same attitude with national movements? Pearlman and Krause point to cross-border *fidayeen* attacks of the 1960s and 1970s that inflated Fatah's reputation while provoking strategic disasters. But why then did Palestinians themselves not recognize this counterproductivity and decide to join PFLP instead of Fatah, or DFLP instead of PFLP, and so on? In a democracy, our answer would be that it is hard for voters to disentangle the incumbent's performance from other factors influencing political and economic outcomes, and that the media and academia ought to do a better job analyzing policies in a fair and timely fashion to inform voting. If Krause had been writing in the 1970s, Palestinians would

surely have read and debated his criticisms of Fatah, and may have rewarded their challengers. These days, experts like Thrall have a receptive audience when they argue that Fatah's post-2007 hegemony over the West Bank, simultaneous to and resulting from its co-optation by the Quartet and its security collaboration with Israel, has undermined the national movement's coercive capacity vis-a-vis the Occupation. With Hamas outlawed as a political party, and after a decade without national elections, lack of competition means Palestinians of the West Bank know all about Fatah's counterproductivity but are powerless to vote against it. In summary, Pearlman and Krause may be right to fear competition in the context of national movements, but more work is needed to explain their surprising empirical finding that perverse effects of competition outweigh its traditional benefits.

If we accept that group competition is counterproductive for national movements, can they not just form alliances and agree to collude? Can Hamas and Fatah not just form a unity government? Citing previous scholarship (Christia (2012), for example) and offering compelling evidence of his own, Krause argues that rebel alliances are cheaply formed and cheaply broken. He therefore concludes that counterproductive competition only ceases when the leader outgrows or subsumes its challengers to become a hegemon. *A priori*, however, one might worry that the conversion from unity to hegemony does nothing more than exchange inter-group fragmentation for intra-group fragmentation. After all, as it grows the hegemon absorbs many people and cliques, all of which have counterproductive factional tendencies. The Zionist movement, for example, hegemonized when Haganah absorbed Irgun's fighters into its ranks during the 1948 war. But what happened to those Irgun fighters? Subsumed into the ranks of Haganah, could they not have plotted seditiously from within? Krause is implying that while movements lack organizational technology to enforce inter-group alliances, groups themselves possess organizational technology to maintain internal cohesion. Future research should try to explain why this is true.

Accepting that hegemony is the way to go, we wonder next what pathways a group can take to achieve hegemony, and how it can ensure that this hegemony will be sustainable. During the 1948 war the Irgun were initially deployed as distinct militia units alongside Haganah units. But Krause explains that after the *Altalena* incident, Haganah leadership decided to disperse Irgun fighters among regular Haganah units so they would have a harder time coordinating and plotting with each other. So by absorbing Irgun fighters Haganah hegemonized, but by absorbing Irgun fighters *cleverly* they hegemonized *sustainably*. For the

Palestinian story, there is room to dispute Krause's claim that Fatah achieved hegemony. Fascinatingly, both Pearlman and Krause see the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon to Tunisia as a strategic defeat but an organizational boon. Lacking a land border with Israel, Tunisia was a poor staging ground for cross-border attacks that had traditionally offered challenger groups a way to win prestige, recruits and funding. Moreover, the PLO's legislature contemporaneously dispensed with rule by consensus, favoring instead majority rule. According to Krause, these changes allowed Fatah, with its larger membership, to assume the hegemonic mantle. Krause argues that Fatah's hegemony allowed it to act strategically, seizing upon popular unrest during the First Intifada, negotiating with one voice at Oslo, and ruling the Territories with one hand during the 1990s. Yet the Oslo negotiations subverted the contemporaneous Madrid Talks, highlighting persistent fragmentation between the movement's *sāmidūn* and *a'ā'idūn* elements. And while Krause hopes to classify Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the 1990s as insignificant challengers ('subordinates') to Fatah's hegemony, the story is more nuanced. As Pearlman argues in another important but latent theme of her book, Palestinian militant groups tend consistently to respect Palestinian public opinion. In the first two years of the First Intifada (1988-89), for example, they largely held their fire while public opinion favored peaceful civil disobedience. As disillusionment set in, they stepped up violence (1990-1993). When the Oslo agreement was revealed, public opinion initially favored peace, so the Islamists largely held their fire except in revenge attacks such as the post-Ayyash bombings of early 1996. In 1997-2000, Israeli casualties plummeted and Fatah arguably did achieve a hegemonic monopoly over violence. But they did this in part thanks to security cooperation with Israel and CIA training and equipment – all evidence of the kind of external patronage that Krause earlier associates with *fragmentation* (Sa'iqa in the 1970s). Moreover, as a hegemon Fatah has often been hobbled by intra-group fragmentation. It is well known, for example, that Arafat deliberately proliferated his security forces into multiple overlapping, redundant branches headed by rival personalities, suggesting that intra-group fragmentation was persistent and caused inefficiencies. Consider furthermore that in the January 2006 legislative elections Fatah's intra-group fragmentation between younger and older cadres, at least as much as inter-group fragmentation between Fatah and Hamas, undermined its performance and made the difference between a Hamas victory versus merely a strong showing. Highlighting Fatah's internal fragmentation, one of Pearlman's interviewees humorously observes that "Fatah is more of a situation than an organization."

Finally, Pearlman and Krause unearth an interesting paradox of national movements. From

a hardline group's perspective, to succeed one must hegemonize, but to hegemonize one may have to give up on ambitious liberation goals in order to accommodate more moderate recruits. This latter consideration should resonate particularly with the contemporary BDS movement, whose non-violent coercive actions tend to require international mass mobilization. Though the BDS leadership retains the 1948 right of return as a core demand (Barghouti 2011), it is hard to imagine the international community holding the BDS picket line if Israel were to offer, say, a partition based on 1967 borders with land swaps. This example, in any case, reminds us that 'hardline' is a relative term. In the late summer of 1940, Britain too was viewed as hardline for deciding to resist German expansion. Indeed, Vichy France derided the British for their "implacable fanaticism" (Paxton (2001)), a charge that should be familiar to several Palestinian groups. To overcome this paradox, hardliners may resort to 'bridge burning' tactics before hegemonizing so as to limit the degree to which moderates can erode the hegemon's negotiating position later.

## 5    Maintaining Autonomy in Transitional Spaces

To meet some of these so-called 'hardliners', we follow Nadya Hajj into the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan. Arriving with no possessions but what they carried on their backs, Palestinian refugees of 1948 and 1967 have built literally generation atop generation a labyrinth of jumbled concrete and tangled power lines that has frustrated, confused and ultimately defied all attempts by their often hostile hosts to exert control. In *Protection Amid Chaos* (2017), Hajj celebrates the flexible resilience and creativity of refugees to protect their property rights via a melding of formalized rights with norms and social sanction mechanisms passed down from village culture.

The national movement may draw several lessons from Hajj's investigation. Firstly, as a staging ground Jordan and Lebanon may be negligibly better options than the already dismal West Bank. While the Palestinian Territories constitute a significantly compromised space perforated by Israeli informants and collaborators, refugees believe the camps of Jordan and Lebanon are likewise infiltrated by state mukhabarat (domestic intelligence). Indeed, historically the Palestinian issue presented first a threat to Jordanian identity with the influx of a half-million refugees after 1948, and then a threat to stability and Hashemite rule via *fidayeen* challenges in 1970-71. Shortly after the PLO's ejection, Jordan organized community committees to formalize and register camp properties, arbitrate property disputes

and interface with residents. The timing of this effort suggests an ulterior motive, widely suspected by residents, of keeping an eye on politically subversive activity. While the camps may originally have been organized by UNRWA, formal registration of property with the Jordanian authorities is now a natural avenue for cultivating informants, while threat of eviction or tax hikes offer the mukhabarat significant leverage to incentivize collaboration.

That said, a second lesson of Hajj's study is that the refugees can successfully coordinate to minimize exploitable points of entry for the state by resolving internal property disputes between families and individuals via community elders. By excluding the state in all but the most intractable disputes, the community covers over internal fissures that intelligence professionals would otherwise tend to exacerbate and exploit. The community, however, relies entirely on these non-violent evasions of authority and has no force of arms to repel outsiders. In Lebanon this has led repeatedly to refugee camps becoming destructively entangled in others' conflicts. Though they had lived peacefully in Beirut for more than three decades, 2,700 residents of the Sabra and Shatila camps were massacred by Lebanese Phalangist militia in 1982. Refugees bore the brunt of Phalangist violence though it was the *fidayeen*, not the refugees, who had helped provoke and taken sides in the Lebanese civil war. More recently, Nahar al-Barad camp was penetrated by a militant group believed to be operating as a proxy for Syria. The Lebanese army responded in May 2007 by annihilating the group in an all-out attack that leveled the camp and displaced 27,000 residents.

Finally, Hajj offers a more nuts-and-bolts view of Fatah's hegemonization process. After the *fidayeen*'s ejection from Jordan in 1971, they set up shop in Lebanon, where their presence was a mixed blessing for camps like Nahar al-Barad. Fatah introduced community committees in the camps to formalize property rights and negotiate property disputes. Hajj's evidence suggests Fatah's intent here was not to develop a tax base, but rather to extend their political hegemony by purchasing the loyalty of local business leaders. Those loyal to Fatah enjoyed more favorable rulings in property disputes, and Fatah would look the other way as they dipped greedily into scarce public resources like water and electricity. We can see in this example how the process of hegemonization is incredibly fraught. To co-opt business leaders, Fatah ran the risk of disaffecting smaller business owners and camp residents who lacked sufficient wasta to bend the new rules in their favor. At the same time, Fatah drew into their ranks business owners who immediately and unscrupulously abused their status to drain scarce public resources for their private benefit. It is hard not to draw a line from these

early dealings and co-optations to rampant corruption within the Palestinian Authority two, three, and four decades later. If this is how Fatah built its power base, it is no wonder that Palestinian hegemony has brought such paltry progress towards national liberation.

# 6 Conclusion

Almost a century since the Ottoman Empire's collapse, Palestinians still do not have a state. As the struggle continues, scholars can do their part by faithfully recording the national movement's history and analyzing past failures and successes with an eye to informing future decision-making. From these four superb volumes we recover several thematic insights. Firstly, in the absence of a world government, human rights and international law will not be enforced by third-party authorities: the Palestinian movement must develop its own means of coercion to extort concessions. The strategic choice between employing violent or non-violent coercion, however, is a luxury that follows only from organizational hegemony within the movement itself. But not all paths to hegemony are the same; serendipity of circumstance and purchased loyalties may achieve hegemony superficially, but internal fractures will reemerge later. Until the movement solves its organizational challenges, the Palestinian people will continue to defy adversity from their wellspring of resilience, flexibility, and creativity.

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