

Reborn as *Fida'i*: The Palestinian Revolution and the (Re)Making of an Icon

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The 1968 Battle of Karameh secured a place in history for the *Fida'i* as an iconic figure of the victorious “new Palestinian.” The ideals that initially animated the *Fida'i* icon in 1968 have been transformed alongside the unstable conditions of the Palestinian liberation struggle. The enduring resonance of the *Fida'i* is nevertheless a pedagogical opportunity to revisit the period of its emergence and draw out lessons for contemporary decolonial struggle. The author argues that the unfulfilled revolutionary promise of the *Fida'i* is best apprehended by focusing on the organizational practices, aspirations, and contradictions from which it emerged and the widespread internationalist and grassroots participation in struggle that it galvanized. Through an examination of *Fida'i* poster art alongside political manifestos, the author analyzes the Palestinian, Arab, and global context in the period when the *Fida'i* became an icon and its subsequent transmutations in the decades that followed. The author illustrates the strategic and analytic principles obscured by various superficial invocations and appropriations of the icon in efforts to recuperate its emancipatory legacy.

Keywords: *Fida'iyyin, Karameh, Palestine, Palestinians, PLO, internationalism, revolutionary war, anti-colonialism*

On March 21, 1968, Israeli forces raided the Jordanian town of Karameh, intending to repress the growing Palestinian insurgency. Instead, on the East Bank of the Jordan River, 300 Palestinian guerrillas, along with Jordanian forces, maintained a historic 32-hour standoff against 15,000 Israeli soldiers (Sayigh, 1987). The battle marked a crucial turning point in the Palestinian Resistance Movement (PRM).¹ As Yezid Sayigh explains, the battle disproved the myth of Israeli “invincibility” that had gripped the region since the 1948 formation of Israel, otherwise known as *al-Nakba*, “catastrophe” (Sayigh, 1987).² This touchstone moment inaugurated the *Fida'i*, the courageous guerilla fighter committed to sacrifice in the service of

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¹ I use the designation Palestinian Resistance Movement (PRM) to refer collectively to the various guerilla groups of this period. The PRM was not a centralized political body.

² *Al-Nakba* was a multiyear Zionist colonial military campaign that permanently displaced 750,000 Palestinians and decimated 500 towns and villages.

collective struggle, as an iconic embodiment and signifier of the principles, conditions, and aspirations of the Palestinian revolution.

At the time of its emergence, the *Fida'i* icon signified the birth of a revolution, a commitment to the liberation of and return to all historic Palestine, and the preparation to embark on a path of armed struggle. The *Fida'i* signified other crucial ideals that animated everyday people's participation in grassroots struggle: the interdependent relationship of social *and* political revolution; the creation of a collective Palestinian identity in exile; and internationalist commitment.

Commemorations of the *Fida'iyyin*, however, have shifted over time, along with the changing, unstable conditions of the Palestinian struggle—especially since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, widely heralded as a peace agreement. The icon itself has evolved as a site of political contestation. Now trapped at the dead end of its two-state vision, the official Palestinian establishment invokes the *Fida'i* in ways that contort or erase the crucial principles from which it emerged. Critics of the establishment often invoke the *Fida'i* to express their desire to revitalize insurgent anti-colonial struggle and to return to a glorified past that may be unredeemable or that perhaps is willfully imagined.

For its implicit emancipatory promise, the image of the *Fida'i* still circulates widely today, adorning T-shirts, posters, and handbags.³ How, then, should people committed to Palestinian liberation engage with varying popular invocations? In my international organizing with Palestinian youth and Palestine solidarity movements, I have observed that even those who identify with the promise of the insurgency often underestimate the sophisticated political coordination and material conditions that gave rise to the *Fida'i*, and many of the ugly truths that gradually erased it or remade its meaning within dominant Palestinian narratives throughout time.

I therefore propose that the enduring resonance of this historic icon should be embraced as a pedagogical opportunity for educating activists about the tremendous potential of grassroots political organization, the key social and psychological imperatives of resistance that marked Karameh as a touchstone moment in the Palestinian revolutionary tradition, and the *Fida'i* as an expression of such transformations. Equally vital is investigating historical intramovement dynamics that the *Fida'i*, as an icon of national unity, has had the power to obscure since the onset.

In this article, I trace the elaboration of the constitutive principles that first animated the *Fida'i* icon and examine how the icon has evolved into a malleable signifier of the shifting terrain of Palestinian political organizing following Karameh. Through an analysis of the *Fida'i* in Palestinian poster art alongside manifestos of the guerilla groups, I demonstrate how the principles that *Fida'i* once presumably signified have been remade, appropriated, and open to interpretation at every phase of the struggle. Despite these appropriations, for everyday people, the *Fida'i* has continued to serve as a steadfast and consistent embodiment of Palestinian commitments to liberation that have spanned the course of decades.

³ I recognize that many contemporary invocations of *Fida'i* are often a commodification of the revolutionary objectives and methods for which the guerillas initially fought.

Through a historical examination of the enduring resonance of the icon, three important lessons come into view. First, revolutionary icons are not born overnight. Although the Battle of Karameh established Palestinians as revolutionary actors, Palestinian resistance fomented long before *al-Nakba*, and in its wake, student organizers laid the necessary foundation for the emergence of the *Fida'i* as both an icon and a material force to be reckoned with. Second, icons are contested from the moment they appear. Even the earliest use of the *Fida'i* as a symbol of national unity and courage obscured intramovement factionalism—particularly ideological and strategic differences and rivalries within the PRM and between the PRM, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Arab states. Third, icons are always vulnerable to colonial appropriation and nationalist recuperation that can empty them of their initial meaning or remake newly ascribed meanings in service of contradictory political aims.

Karameh and the Creation of a New People

The two decades that followed *al-Nakba* are commonly referred to as the “lost years,” a period characterized by shock, uncertainty, and helplessness for Palestinians. For author Fawaz Turki (1989), *al-Nakba* produced a “gap in our souls . . . where the memory of it was later to haunt the inner history of our whole generation” (p. 17). Yet the afterlife of *al-Nakba* was not one of painful memories alone, but of an enduring material violence accompanied by the omnipresence of loss and catastrophe of the past. The events at Karameh make evident that memories that haunt can also compel action. And so it was that “the lost years” culminated in a renewal of revolutionary struggle that produced a “new Palestinian” whose authority was confirmed with the victory at Karameh—coincidentally, the Arabic word for “dignity.”

The dominant image of the hapless Palestinian refugee was thus supplanted by the iconic image of the *Fida'i*. This shift had profound implications for the Arab states that were still reeling from their defeat in the 1967 war. “Everything indicated despair,” recounts Anouar Abdel-Malek (1983), “and then, from the heart of the night, there came a gleam of hope” (p. 19):

The people of the tents, the anonymous men and women, children and old people of Palestine embarked upon the only valid course open to a nation stripped of its homeland and faced with that ethnic, cultural and political racism which lies at the core of all imperialism. The people of Palestine endowed themselves with resistance organizations charged with the coordination, definition and pursuit of a campaign of armed national liberation The Battle of Karameh marked the end of a process by which defeats and reversals engendered a demoralization that the enemy had hoped would be irreversible. (pp. 19–20)

Though born from loss and despair, the *Fida'i* came to embody this new hope of organized courage for self-determination. Depictions of guerilla fighters with faces wrapped in the *keffiyeh* emerged as part of a political discourse that cited the victory at and with Karameh as the birth of both a people and a revolution.

Just as Frantz Fanon (1963) observed that “decolonization is the veritable creation of new men” (p. 36), the notion of rebirth has figured centrally in the Palestinian revolution.⁴

Recounting the gains of this epoch, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat emphasized this promise: “We did a very important thing. We create[ed] a new people. . . . We were refugees, homeless, we became freedom fighters” (Yaqubi, 2016).⁵ An iconic 1980 PLO poster (see Figure 1) affirms such sentiments with the caption, “Karameh: The Palestinian Birthday: 1968–1980.”

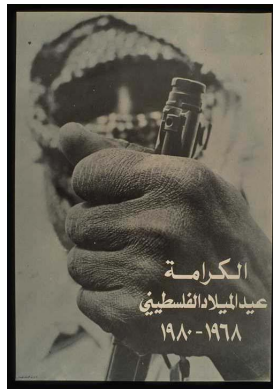


Figure 1. Karameh: The Palestinian birthday (PLO Unified, 1980).

By de-pathologizing the refugee condition, Palestinians were remade through the image of the *Fida'i* as an agent of anti-colonial resistance (Husary, 2015).

Just as the hauntings of *al-Nakba* animated the Battle of Karameh, the current struggle for Palestinian liberation remains haunted by the unfulfilled promise of the *Fida'iyyin*: the promise of return and liberation. Yet, it is important to take seriously hauntings that compel even superficial or commodified invocations of the *Fida'i*, and the potential for its legacy to be remade in service of liberation. This task requires an examination of the conditions that initially gave rise to the *Fida'i* as an icon: organizing that instructively begins with the courage of youth.

Student Movements After *Al-Nakba*

Mjriam Abu Samra (2021) notes that following *al-Nakba*, Palestinian students created an organic revolutionary vanguard that organized everyday Palestinians to define a new collective identity for

⁴ Fanonian theory was deeply sown into the discursive practices of the Palestinian guerillas. For example, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine argued that they were “preparing for a total revolution, which will destroy our old world and bring about a new one” (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [PFLP], 1971).

⁵ Arafat was the founder of The Palestinian National Movement (*al-Fatah*) in 1959 and served as PLO chairman between 1969 and his death in 2004.

themselves as agents of liberation. This vanguard prominently included students of *Jam'iat al-'urwa al-wuthqā* in Beirut, the predecessor of the Arab Nationalist Movement, which later became the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP; Kazziha, 1975). While a student, George Habash—president of the *Urwa* in 1951 and leader of the Arab Nationalist Movement, and later founder of the PFLP—fostered the belief among his comrades that their political aspirations could be achieved through Arab nationalism and by building an organization of mass struggle (Kazziha, 1975). Meanwhile, the Palestinian Student Union (PSU) in Cairo gave rise to leaders Yasser Arafat and Salah Khalaf (Abū Iyād), who would later go on to form the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (*al-Fatah*). Arafat and Khalaf claimed electoral victory of the PSU in 1952 after running on a platform of Palestinian self-reliance, and identity in exile (Brand, 1988).

The experiences of these groups in Beirut and Cairo, along with those of student formations in Amman, Baghdad, Damascus, and other places, laid the foundation for the emergence of a student movement that would transform the Palestinian struggle. In 1959, these groups came together to form the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS), the first post-*Nakba* sector-based organization with a Palestinian national political infrastructure that transcended international borders. GUPS united a plurality of Palestinian ideological and political tendencies and, crucially, became a representative force for Palestinian national aspirations in regional and international politics. At GUPS' conference in 1962, members adopted a resolution calling for an independent Palestinian liberation entity—a vision that was realized in 1964, when leaders at the Arab Summit Conference in Cairo created the PLO (Brand, 1988). As Brand (1988) notes,

The establishment of the . . . [PLO] should be viewed, not as the beginning of the first chapter of the reemergence of the Palestinian national movement, but as its conclusion, the natural extension of Palestinian efforts in the 1950s and early 1960s, finally adopted and bolstered by Arab regimes, to establish a national entity. (p. 4)

GUPS valued both political representation and revolutionary leadership, and its student membership initially criticized the PLO's elitist nature and dependence on Arab states (Abu Samra, 2021).⁶ GUPS continued to develop its own political trajectory through regional and international political alliances, including global coalitions like the International Union of Students (Abu Samra, 2021). In 1965, with the backing of Gamal Abdel Nasser, GUPS organized a successful convening of students and political and intellectual figures from 58 countries, during which they focused primarily on the relationship between Palestine and anti-colonial struggles of the African continent (Brand, 1988). These forms of “non-state people's diplomacy” (Chamberlin, 2012), Paul Chamberlin argues, earned Palestinians considerable international support. Through its international engagement, GUPS became a de facto voice for Palestine in international circuits (Abu Samra, 2021).

Yet its significance was not rooted in representation alone. By the mid-1960s, numerous GUPS members were enlisting as guerilla fighters in the *Fida'iyyin* resistance. Their involvement was no surprise:

⁶ Student movements were critical of the political elite long before the creation of the PLO. Salim al-Za'nun (Abu Al-Adib), Executive Committee member of the PSU in 1953, argues that “the Association [PSU] replaced the All-Palestine Government, which was diminishing gradually, becoming paralysed and incapable of doing anything” (al-Za'nun, 2010, p. 3).

Many guerilla groups were founded by leaders who had made their political debuts as student organizers a decade prior (al-Za'nun, 2010). Their involvement was also informed by the anti-colonial ideologies and strategies they were exposed to as students, which included having access to revolutionary literature circulated through their internationalist alliances.

Like other anti-colonial student movements, Palestinian students adhered to a practice that linked revolutionary theory, organization building, base building, and practices of international solidarity, and political and armed struggle. Two GUPS newsletters, *al-Ittihad (The Union)* and *Jabal al-Zaytun (Mount of Olives)*, fostered this relationship between theory and practice, garnering support for guerilla organizations and developing a coherent anti-colonial national narrative among Palestinians and for Palestinians in the international community (Brand, 1988). By participating in and building popular credibility for the growing guerilla movement, GUPS' pedagogical praxis helped to induct the *Fida'i* as an icon of Palestinian national aspirations in the psyche of Palestinians across borders and among global actors.

Following the Battle of Karameh, GUPS continued to galvanize popular support and solidarity for Palestine among global revolutionaries by mobilizing the resonant *Fida'i* icon. Take, for example, this 1970 GUPS poster (Figure 2):

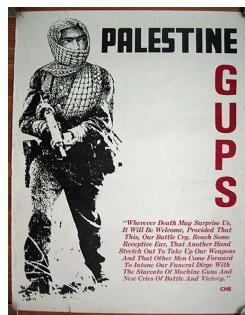


Figure 2. Wherever death may surprise us (General Union of Palestine Students, 1970).

Featuring an image of a guerilla fighter alongside a quote illustrating a commitment to ultimate sacrifice by revolutionary Che Guevara, the poster makes the Palestinian struggle legible, communicated through the image of the *Fida'i* as an embodiment of broader Third World and anti-colonial ambitions and ideologies.

Popular Credibility for the *Fida'iyyin*

While the student movement was instrumental in establishing the *Fida'i* as an icon of courage and anti-colonial internationalism, *al-Fatah* instrumentalized that foundation to anchor itself as the leader of the broader *Fida'iyyin* movement at Karameh. The defeat of Arab states in the 1967 war caused widespread despair across the region and loss of faith in Arab leaders. Such transformations established an open terrain for the *Fida'iyyin* to rise as political actors whom everyday people pinned their hopes on. Following 67, the *Fida'iyyin* escalated their operations, which eventually led to the events of Karameh in March 1968.

In the lead-up to the battle, guerilla insurgency, mostly carried out as cross-border raids from Jordan, was linked to two main goals, particularly for *al-Fatah*. The first was to compel Arab states to embolden their confrontation with Israel, specifically through popular war (by resourcing the guerillas) rather than conventional state-to-state warfare (*al-Fatah*, 1968). The second was to produce a new set of social, cultural, and political ideals to revolutionize the masses and enable them to become the protagonists of the struggle against Zionism (Maksoud, 1973).⁷ In *al-Fatah's* view, both were necessary to gain and maintain credibility.

Indeed, with *al-Fatah's* landmark victory at Karameh, which also demonstrated its ability to compel a Jordanian military battalion to join them in the battle against King Hussein's orders, thousands enlisted as new rank-and-file freedom fighters. *Al-Fatah* came to claim its victory at Karameh as a catalyst for "unifying" the resistance. Take, for example, this 1971 *al-Fatah* poster (Figure 3) commemorating Karameh:



Figure 3. The battle of al Karameh produced/actualized the unity of the fighters (Nabaa, 1971).

The image features three fighters at the helm, each representing a different regional force in the Arab political field, followed by masses of presumably everyday rank-and-file resistance members. The subtext of this image articulates the *Fida'i* as the unifier of fragmented guerilla and military forces in both the Palestinian and Arab political fields by naming the sectors Karameh presumably unified: The Jordanian Arab Army, The Al 'Asifah Forces (*al-Fatah's* military wing), and The Liberation Forces. It was in this moment that *al-Fatah* would simultaneously redefine the nature of the struggle through a Palestinian nationalist framework—and thus open the possibility for assuming political leadership—and recodify Palestine's liberation as central to the cause of the broader Arab region, thus earning overwhelming popular credibility for itself.

⁷ While many argue that *al-Fatah* was driven by strategic pragmatism rather than a methodical and ideological calculus, the early publications of *al-Fatah* suggest otherwise. Paul Chamberlin describes their values as a "nebulous ideology" which was molded by "Palestinian nationalism mixed with Third World Liberation and left-wing social thought" (Chamberlin, 2012, p. 15).

While unifying the resistance was integral to establishing *al-Fatah's* credibility and position as a regional political actor, its spectacular performance of bravado at Karamah solidified the *Fida'i* as an icon of courage.⁸ Fully aware of their asymmetrical military capacity, guerilla forces rejected the assumption that they needed to match Israel's military technical capabilities, deeming it a bourgeois sensibility that was contradictory to revolutionary war. Anti-colonial theorist Eqbal Ahmad explains how the West often misunderstands the imperatives of guerilla struggle, which rarely outmaneuvers the state militarily, but can achieve other kinds of political gains (Ahmad, 1965). This calculus informed *al-Fatah* commandos like Salah Ta'amari, who oversaw the events at Karamah:

[W]e did not have the experience or the weapons, our military knowledge was based on rudimentary training and what we had read in the writings of Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, and all the other revolutionary books that were available in the 1960s, but we saw with our own eyes that Karamah was going to enter history, and that each one of us who was going to fall as a martyr was going to be replaced by a thousand others—indeed, we lived and saw thousands flooding into Karamah after the battle. (Ta'amari, 2011, p. 4)

Notably, in Karamah, *al-Fatah* deviated from the rules of guerilla engagement. According to Abu Jihad, a senior *al-Fatah* military leader,

Rule number one is that a guerilla force does not stand and fight a regular army. . . . In short they [Israel] were challenging us to break the rules of guerrilla warfare and to stand and fight. With all the world publicity that was focused on the situation at the time, they calculated that we could not afford to be seen as cowards who ran away. (as cited in Ayad, 2017, p. 195)

Despite breaching guerilla codes, *al-Fatah* accounted for other imperatives in its decision to fight, thereby achieving important social, political, and psychological gains—namely, inspiring thousands of people to join the resistance.

The "new Palestinian" born at and with Karamah was courageously prepared to confront Israel head-on, pressure reactionary Arab regimes for policy change, compel allied Arab regimes to resource the *Fida'iyyin*, outbid the PLO for popular legitimacy, and claim victory in unifying the fighters. All the guerilla groups enjoyed tremendous growth as a result of this moment. However, the gains of Karamah earned *al-Fatah* a distinct position of power within the political landscape, a position that, nevertheless, also engendered ruthless rivalries and tragic mishaps.

⁸ *Al-Fatah* offered a comprehensive assessment of political, social, and military achievements gained at Karamah in its written manifestos, *Political and Armed Struggle and Revolution Until Victory (al-Fatah, 1969, 1970)*.

The *Fida'i* Icon and the Power to Obscure Discord



Figure 4. The Arab commandos: Defiant new force in the Middle East (Garridor, 1968).

Although the events of 1968 gave rise to the *Fida'i* as an iconic figure of national unity and courage, the force of this symbolism also held the power to obscure the PRM's fierce internal quarrels over ideology, methods, and strategy. The use of *Fida'i* as icon gave extraordinary power to individual charismatic leaders, as Figure 4 demonstrates, which resultantly papered over the fact that some leaders were motivated by power, zealous desires for recognition, and interpersonal conflicts—tendencies that facilitated corruption, hasty decisions, and nepotism. Omar Jabary Salamanca states,

There is so much to say and learn about the times that preceded and followed the events at Karameh during the energizing 1960s and 1970s. Yet it is important to emphasize that this history, like some many histories, obscures and is mediated by varying forms of propaganda, romanticism, racism and hypermasculine heroism that fundamentally defined politics during this epoch. (Salamanca, 2018 p. 12)

Ample power struggles among Palestinian forces define the dynamics of the very same political field that gave rise to the *Fida'i* as an icon. In January 1968, before the Battle of Karameh, *al-Fatah* released its first political communiqué, which attempted to dispel the notion that Palestinian fighters were bloodthirsty terrorists and to sway global opinion toward the integrity of its cause (*al-Fatah*, 1968). *Al-Fatah* criticized several Arab states for utilizing Palestine for their own gain, the United Nations for failing to uphold

international law that would restrict Israel's expansion, and the PLO for its elitism. *Al-Fatah* argued that the global community had left Palestinians with no option other than the calcification of their resistance. The communique paralleled speeches given by *al-Fatah* senior leader Yasser Arafat during this period:

We waited and waited for a long time; from '48 until now, waiting for the United Nations, but nothing had been done, except more refugees. So, we think that the only way is to carry our arms and to fight. We were obliged to fight. We don't like war. But the person who has been kicked out from their home is obliged and has the right to fight. To fight for living. To fight for his future. For his children. For his people. And this is what we are doing. (Cine News, 1973)

While the messages of the moment captured the materiality of occupation and dispossession that led Palestinians down the course of armed struggle, they also provided a robust critique of the Palestinian political class in an effort to secure the popularity of *al-Fatah* among everyday people (*al-Fatah*, 1968): "Today the PLO, this pseudo-liberation organization, is no longer playing any significant role in the liberation of Palestine. The reason being that it did not spring from the masses themselves but was artificially imposed from above" (p. 6). Discrediting the PLO was a strategic imperative for *al-Fatah*, which was desperately attempting to secure political recognition—but it also targeted other PRM forces, competing most of all with the PFLP.

Forces within the PRM often competed with one another for recruits into their formations, for resources from Arab states, and for popularity among everyday people. Historian Hisham Sharabi notes that guerilla operations were sometimes claimed by two or more factions at once, undermining the popular credibility of all and eroding the aspirations of the collective (Sharabi, 1970). Smaller formations within the PRM often hurled damaging accusations against *al-Fatah* as well. Rosemary Sayigh (1979) explains how leftist groups accused *al-Fatah* of "mindless militarism" in Jordan. These sentiments are confirmed in PFLP founder George Habash's critiques of *al-Fatah's* dominance over the political landscape and its leaders' excessive arrogance:

Had the resistance been led by a revolutionary political organization, the feda'i would have behaved differently; he would not have carried arms to show off or to further his personal ends. He would have been a revolutionary who knew that he represented a cause, that he was responsible for that cause, and that the cause belonged to the masses. As a consequence, it would be his duty to serve the masses at all times and to recognize the importance of commitment and discipline. (as cited in Maksoud, 1973, p. 73)

Indeed, *al-Fatah's* egotistical elements of militant insurgency, coupled with strategies that were often overdetermined by pragmatism and the desire to attain political recognition, at times overshadowed the revolutionary principles for which they argued the *Fida'i* fought. Habash, for his part, saw this as a betrayal of the dialectical relationship between revolutionary theory and practice: what Sayigh (1979) describes as a "clear revolutionary ideology backed up by a programme of revolutionary mass mobilization" (p. 154).

Much of the PFLP's 1969 "Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine" was dedicated to the importance of revolutionary theory, particularly outlining the bridging of a class consciousness and national liberation, which it argued was missing from *al-Fatah's* program (PFLP, 1969). However, while Sayigh (1979) concedes that the relationship between revolutionary theory and armed struggle never fully came to fruition in the PRM, she argues that it was indeed central for *al-Fatah* during its station in Jordan. Pushing back against the charges levied against *al-Fatah*, she insists that "its call to armed struggle was backed up by projects of social, cultural and economic development" (p. 154) and that *al-Fatah* appealed to the pragmatic sensibilities of the masses who were no longer interested in intellectual posturing or *felsefeh* (philosophizing) and were keen to take action (Sayigh, 1979).

Discord and factionalism were common not only between PRM groups, but also within them—sometimes ideological, but also driven by quests for recognition and influence. Clusters emerged on the basis of ideological leaning, geo-political alliances, and interpersonal conflict alike. Larger guerilla groups absorbed many of the smaller ones, but they also endured major splits that resulted in the creation of newer formations. In 1968, the PFLP split, for instance, and from that rupture emerged the third most significant group of the time, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).

While the *Fida'iyyin* themselves and the broader society indeed shared mutual commitments to and understandings of the nature of their struggle, dominant nationalist narratives—mostly derived from *al-Fatah* claims over the victory at Karamah—have, in the decades that followed, obscured these instructive disagreements, ideological differences, and methodological mistakes. Amid these intramovement fissures, Palestinians and global anti-colonial movements still revered the *Fida'iyyin* as a unified expression of Palestinian demands for return and liberation. Many were aware that Palestinian cadres were forced into action in less-than-ideal conditions. But it is in light of these conflicts that we can understand the force of the *Fida'i* as an icon of pluralistic revolutionary zeal. The *Fida'iyyin* movement was able to withstand multiple fissures precisely because at its core, *Fida'i* represented the willful commitment of everyday people to partake in popular anti-colonial resistance.

The *Fida'i* as an Icon of Social Transformation

As the guerilla groups gained popular credibility, the *Fida'i* emerged forcefully as a symbol of national unity, courage, revolutionary consciousness,⁹ and an icon of anti-colonial internationalism. The evolution of this symbolism corresponded to organizational transformations within the PRM and Palestinian political landscape. In the wake of the 1967 Arab defeat, Nasser attempted to sway the PLO, the "formal power," toward convergence with the armed resistance, the "legitimate power" (Abū Iyād & Rouleau,

⁹ Guerilla groups emphasized the importance of educating the masses to enable them to distinguish between revolutionary and nonrevolutionary war and to maintain clarity on the aims of the struggle (PFLP, 1971; *al-Fatah*, 1970) For example, the movement produced educational materials denouncing anti-Semitism and distinguishing between Zionists (those who endorse and enact a colonial ideology) and Jewish communities (Kadi, 1969).

1981).¹⁰ Amid a crisis in political leadership that the defeat of 1967 and victory at Karamah precipitated, *al-Fatah* leveraged its new legitimacy to demand that the guerilla groups comprise at least half of the seats of the Palestinian National Council, the PLO's legislative body—a demand met just three months after Karamah, in June 1968.

The following month, the reformed Palestinian National Council met in Cairo and revised the National Covenant.¹¹ It sustained its original (1964) commitment to the liberation of all historic Palestine as “an indivisible territorial unit” and to armed struggle. However, revisions to the charter introduced an acknowledgment of the *Fida'iyyin* as the central actors of the liberation strategy (PLO, 1968, p. 1). Article 30 read, “Fighters and carriers of arms in the war of liberation are the nucleus of the popular army which will be the protective force for the gains of the Palestinian Arab people” (PLO, 1968, p. 1). By December 1968, *Fida'i* operations had expanded to Southern Lebanon and, soon after, into the Galilee (Sayigh, 1979). By February 1969, *Fida'iyyin* groups had control of a majority of seats on the PLO Executive Committee, with Arafat at the helm. The *Fida'i* thus emerged as an icon of national unity, beyond that of militant formations, to symbolize more organized and transnational cohesion of the guerilla, political, and social forces of the resistance across borders.

These structural transfigurations were accompanied by cultural and social ones. As Eqbal Ahmad (1965) reminds us, the difference between revolutionary and state-sponsored war is that the former produces social roles for everyday people who may not be the carriers of arms: caring for and protecting fighters in hideouts and those injured, educating society about the importance and relevance of the *Fida'i* struggle, transmitting knowledge and information that serve *Fida'iyyin* strategies, and so on. Jamal Nassar (1997) notes that following Karamah, “Palestinian literature, art, songs and media made the Fedayeen into legendary heroes” (p. 84). Guerilla ranks swelled, while images of the *Fida'i* circulated on leaflets in the camps, celebrations of *Fida'i* military operations filled the streets with song, and *Fida'i* funerals were attended by those with no relation to the deceased (Sirhan, 1970).

The *Fida'iyyin* movement changed the dominant psychological and social orientations toward struggle and toward history-making as such. During this early period, Rabab Abdulhadi (1998) notes, the broader “environment of occupation and resistance relaxed social control, thus enabling Palestinian women to join guerilla groups [see Figure 5], which resulted in their increased involvement in the resistance movement” (p. 664).

¹⁰ PLO chairman Ahmad Shukeiry met with *al-Fatah* leaders in an attempt to restore their confidence. He argued that King Hussein of Jordan had betrayed him and that he hoped to restore alliances with the Arab regimes during the August 1967 convening in Khartoum. Unable to realize these ambitions, Shukeiry resigned as chairman of the PLO in December (Abū Iyād & Rouleau, 1981).

¹¹ The National Covenant, otherwise known as the National Charter, was a document first adopted by the PLO in 1964. It served as the constitutional document of the Palestinian struggle for decades thereafter (Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO], 1968).



Figure 5. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Kanafani, 1968).

A 1968 PFLP poster, drawn by the famous Palestinian writer and PFLP spokesperson Ghassan Kanafani, demonstrates the way *Fida'i* came to embody the importance of social transformations within Palestinian society during this period, particularly the increased normalization of the involvement of women in resistance.

Less acknowledged than the social gains for women, however, were the implications of the revolution for children. Sociologist Bassem Sirhan claims that the *Fida'i* both influenced and represented a social transformation for "the generation of liberation" (Sirhan, 1970). Drawing on research conducted with Palestinian children in Jordan and Lebanon, Sirhan shows that, unlike the post-*Nakba* generation, whose experience was marked by despair and uncertainty, children in 1968 were enthused about and emboldened by their prospective role in liberating their people and land (see Figure 6). Preceding the Battle of Karamah, Nasserism was the dominant political current, and attending university to attain an engineering degree was the primary social trend (Sirhan, 1970). After Karamah, these political and social currents shifted toward supporting the revolution. A staggering 84% of the children in Sirhan's study stated that their role as Palestinians was to join the *Fida'i* ranks (Sirhan, 1970).



Figure 6. This is our son: Where is yours? (PFLP, 1970).

As illustrated in the PFLP poster in Figure 6, many youths received tremendous support from their parents, who felt pride in and dignity from their children's participation in the *Fida'iyyin* movement. Ta'amari recalls that the idea for *al-Fatah's* Cubs and Flowers children's clubs to prioritize education came to him during the events following Karameh, when children were eager to partake and support the struggle (Ta'amari, 2011). Palestinian children of the *Fida'i* generation were coming of age just as the whole of their society was being remade.

***Fida'i* as an Expression of Third World Ambitions**

More than being theirs alone, the struggle for "the generation of liberation" was internationalist. In 1965, al-Asifa Forces General Command released its first communiqué, which asserted that the struggle of the *Fida'iyyin* required the material and moral support of Arab nations and the world, inviting support from lovers of freedom everywhere (al-Asifa, 1965). *Al-Fatah's* communiqués from then on (but particularly after Karameh) regularly analogized the ambitions of the *Fida'iyyin* to that of anti-colonial liberation movements across the Third World (*al-Fatah*, 1969). For its part, after 1967, the PFLP more tenaciously emphasized the inseparability of class consciousness and the national liberation struggle in its strategic vision, which undergirded political alliances and even recruitments of revolutionaries from all over the world. Its 1969 *Strategy* pamphlet insisted that Palestinians "enter into full alliance with all revolutionary forces on the world level" (PFLP, 1969, p. 36).

Frequently citing lessons from Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba, and other sites of anti-imperialist struggle, Palestinian revolutionaries persistently looked to the Third World for guidance as they carved their own path toward liberation (Nassar, 1997). Abdulhadi (2009) notes,

Not unlike other Third World movements and organizations such as the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) in Chile, Tupamaros in Uruguay, and Black Panthers in the United States,

Palestinian radicals drew eclectically from Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Trotskyism as well as other anti-colonial theories and indigenous practices. (p. 18)

While Palestinians had gradually and organically developed their internationalist commitments and alliances in the two decades prior, as the early alliances of GUPS evidenced, it was only after Karamah that they attracted widespread international solidarity (Chamberlin, 2012). By that time, the *Fida'i* had become an embodiment and communicator of the Palestinian revolution globally.

Images of the *Fida'iyyin* circulated in newsletters and pamphlets of anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and national liberation movements, student groups, political parties, and unions across the world. Cooperation between global movements and the Palestinian revolution expanded after 1968, both through joint guerilla trainings with Third World insurgents and through the creation of shared educational materials and propaganda (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Fidayin—Fedaine—Fedayeen (Padrón, 1968).

Created in 1968 by the Cuban-led Organization of Solidarity for the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), the poster shown in Figure 7 features a *Fida'i* amid the backdrop of the term *guerilla* transliterated from Arabic into other languages. As Jessica Stites Mor (2019) argues, OPSAAAL relied on poster art, particularly in its *Tricontinental* publication, “to promote a radical-socialist, anti-imperialist, version of Tricontinental solidarity that would appeal to leaders of the emerging Non-Aligned Movement” (p. 53). OSPAAAL’s cultural production was tied to another goal: to raise consciousness among everyday people by promoting armed struggle and popular war through accessible art (see Figure 7) that was legible to people from varied cultural backgrounds (Stites Mor, 2019). Images of the *Fida'iyyin*, featured in OSPAAAL’s *Tricontinental* publication from 1968 onward, alongside essays by Palestinian revolutionaries translated into several languages, were not only an elucidation of Palestinian aspirations, but also an illustration of how *Fida'i* became an iconic embodiment of the anti-colonial internationalist struggle that OSPAAAL was advancing.

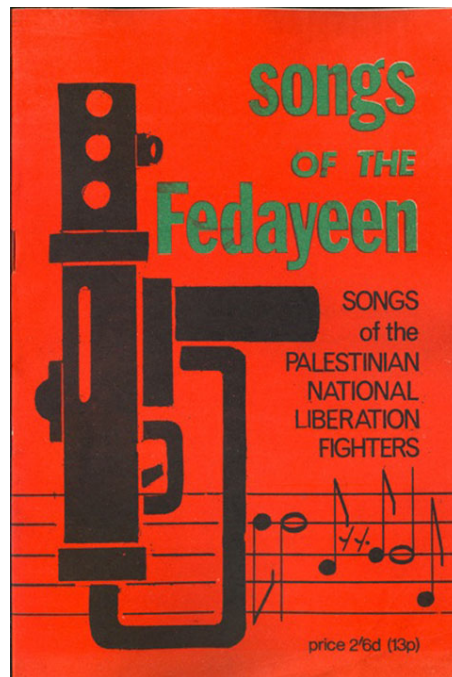


Figure 8. Songs of the Fedayeen (McGuire & Nabaah, 1970).

As Joseph Massad (2003) notes, following the “guerrillas’ credible performance at the Battle of Karamah in 1968, a new crop of songs emerged celebrating the resistance and looking forward to Palestine’s liberation” (p. 30) During this period, *Fida’iyyin* songs and manifestos were also translated into various languages for global circulation. Take, for example, the image shown in Figure 8. The publication of songs of the *Fida’iyyin* demonstrates that the *Fida’i* had entered the global radical imaginary to the extent that it could signify stories, ideals, and aspirations without the need for the icon itself. These developments highlight global awareness of the social transformation within Palestinian society, which included the popularization of radical knowledge and cultural production communicated through the global resonance of the *Fida’i*. By 1969, the icon and the decolonial process that it engendered became inseparable from the PLO.

The *Fida’i* Falls From View: Demise of the PLO

By 1969, the PLO had expanded the infrastructure for Palestinians from disparate ideologies, geographies, and sectors to work collectively toward national liberation and the return of displaced Palestinians. In Jordan, however, the strength of the revolution was a mounting threat to the security of the Hashemite monarchy. King Hussein grew anxious that allowing the PLO to remain stationed in Jordan would result in the overthrow of the monarchy. Following the PFLP hijacking of four aircrafts in September 1970, Hussein launched a war against the *Fida’iyyin* in a conflagration remembered as Black September. After this excruciating defeat, by spring 1971, the PLO relocated to Lebanon.

Despite its defeat in Jordan, the PLO continued to expand its infrastructure to support all three elements of the revolution: the political, armed, and social forces across borders that the *Fida'i* continued to represent. Gradually, however, the icon took on a new valence. As Jamil Hilal (2007) notes, the 1970s saw the PLO bureaucracy grow too rapidly for it to properly shoulder its required labor and finances; this "limited its agility and created interests specific to this bureaucracy that made it resist change" (p. 4). Fearful of the Arab states misrepresenting Palestine on the international stage, the PLO ramped up its role in international diplomacy, hoping to attain official recognition.

In 1974, the PLO adopted a 10-point program developed by the DFLP that included the first formal articulations of a two-state compromise—characterized as a means, not an end, toward the liberation of all the Mandate territory of Palestine. While the program did not denounce armed resistance, it emphasized the importance of other means, including diplomacy. In its wake, leftist formations temporarily withdrew from the PLO and formed the Rejectionist Front, arguing that only through the *Fida'iyin*-led revolution would all historic Palestine be regained. Despite this opposition, the PLO's trajectory shift earned them official United Nations recognition as the "sole legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people" (Aruri & Farsoun, 2006, p. 189). Images of the *Fida'i* (see Figure 9) transformed alongside these reconfigurations and were reflected in the new cultural productions that the PLO promoted.

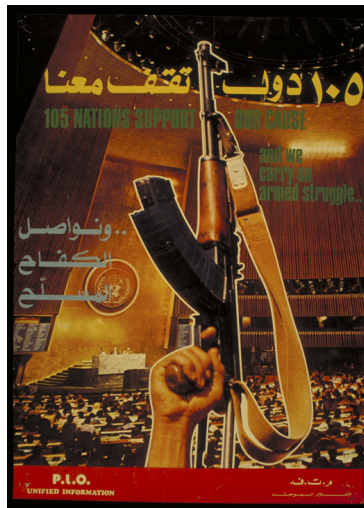


Figure 9. 105 Nations support our cause (PLO, 1974).

Figure 9 provides a clear example of these changes. Erasing the image of the *Fida'i* and instead featuring his arms against the backdrop of a United Nations meeting, the *al-Fatah*-dominated PLO sought to relegitimize itself in a political atmosphere of tremendous pressure against its divergence from its previous course. In this moment, *Fida'i* began to fade into the shadow of history, as the PLO appropriated its symbolism to legitimize a nebulous political trajectory with new end goals and animating principles.

Over the 20 years that followed, the PLO suffered major losses, including its 1982 defeat in, and exodus from, Lebanon, as well as a number of serious internal fractures between and within the PLO political

parties. Regional and global reconfigurations of power made the PLO more vulnerable, especially after the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the U.S.-launched Gulf War. Without the regional cooperation it relied on as an exilic body, exhaustion, pragmatism, desires for recognition, financial precarity and the economic interests of the Palestinian bourgeoisie propelled the leadership to concede on the principles that had anchored the revolution. By the mid-1980s, Arafat had drastically altered the political vocabulary he had used in the two decades prior. The poster shown in Figure 10 encapsulates this new discourse, in which *al-Fatah's* search for "peace" outweighed its commitment to the people for and from whom the *Fida'i* was born. This time, the poster made no reference to the people at all. By this period, the *Fida'i* and many of the principles it had presumably fought for had been all but erased in the dominant political strands of the PLO.



Figure 10. *Fat'h believes in just peace* (Nabaa, 1986).

In December 1987, popular resistance inside Occupied Palestine fomented the launch of the Palestinian *Intifada* (Uprising) coordinated by the United Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU).¹² The *Intifada* transformed the political landscape, causing anxieties within the ranks of the PLO's leadership about a rising organic leadership from inside Palestine that would threaten the relevance of PLO senior leaders. These fears, coupled with broader global and geo-political reconfigurations, propelled secret-channel peace talks behind closed doors. Soon thereafter, PLO senior leaders convened to lay claim to the resistance in the homeland and to leverage it for their new political ambitions. Less than one year into the *Intifada*, in November 1988, the Palestinian National Council met in Algeria to proclaim an independent state (Figure 11).

¹² Nadia Naser-Najjab states that the UNLU's position "clearly contrasted with the attitudes and predispositions of Palestinian negotiators in the 'secret channel' talks that produced the Oslo agreements and the subsequent 2000 Camp David peace negotiations" (Naser-Najjab, 2020, p. 63).



Figure 11. 1st anniversary of the Palestinian state proclamation (Mysyrowicz, 1989).

Following the 1988 Declaration of Palestinian Independence, the dominant current of the PLO began to promote a new national discourse that erased the *Fida'i* or appropriated it to restore credibility toward the path of negotiations. The image in Figure 11, published by the PLO in 1989, evidences this erasure, but also demonstrates the predicament of the moment: The ambiguity of what was to come next is conveyed in a nebulous arrangement of the sun and clouds that fall beneath a Palestinian flag in the absence of people, land, and symbols of revolution and freedom that had long animated the PLO's poster art in the decades earlier. In the final instance, the proclamation set the foundation in the lead-up to the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 which simultaneously sabotaged the *Intifada* and erased *Fida'i*'s legacy as a conveyer of Palestinian aspirations.

The Accords crystalized the transformation that Palestinian political and social life had been undergoing since 1974: The promise of liberation and return to all historic Palestine was thereby officially supplanted by a hollow promise of a state on just 22% of historic Palestine. Describing the effects of this transformation as a "prolonged decay of the Palestinian National Movement," Tariq Dana (2019) argues that

the post-Oslo Palestinian dilemma includes contradictions forged by simultaneous interactions between colonialism (military occupation, settler-colonialism and exploitation of resources); neocolonialism (economic dependency, political asymmetry and subordination); post-conflict state-building (technical institution-building, donors' intervention and the pursuit of neoliberal policies); and indirect colonial rule (governance through an acquiescent elite, security coordination, and suppression of resistance). (p. 40)

These contradictions constructed modes in which the *Fida'iyyin* are commemorated in the present. As Dana (2019) demonstrates, *al-Fatah* relies on a dual discourse whereby the *Fida'i* simultaneously undergoes erasure and transmutation. The *al-Fatah*-led Palestinian leadership appeals to international

audiences through a “political vocabulary, focused on negotiations, peacebuilding, state-building, and public order” while simultaneously allowing some branches within the party to “emphasize its character as a liberation movement that inaugurated a radical phase of anti-colonial struggle” (p. 45). The former secures its political recognition through international diplomatic circuits, while the latter restores its credibility among Palestinians. Intellectually and politically engaging these contradictions, rather than evading them, is necessary to recuperate *Fida’i’s* emancipatory legacy.

Conclusion

Nationalist accounts of the Battle of Karameh, Salamanca (2018) explains, tend to reproduce categories that “have either been emptied of their meaning or lost their relevance altogether” (p. 14). In my view, some nationalist accounts have erased Karameh, citing the emergence of political struggle in 1964 with the birth of the PLO, rather than in 1968 through the victory of the *Fida’iyyin*. The accounts that do commemorate Karameh tend to glorify the *Fida’iyyin’s* original armed insurgency, but are also often accompanied by a willful forgetting of the nationalist arrogance, discord, masculinist militancy, hunger for recognition, overzealous pragmatism, discord and extreme pain that accompanied the emergence of the icon. Sometimes *Fida’i* is appropriated by political forces still waging armed resistance in the present to demonstrate that they are continuing to carry the torch of the original *Fida’iyyin*. Yet these appropriations are often deployed to discredit the Palestinian Authority and *al-Fatah* loyalists—embarrassing them, even—for abandoning the national principles from which *Fida’i* emerged and earning opposition parties increased credibility and political clout. Such rivalries are not new, but entrenched in the fierce battles over claims to *Fida’i* and the power to reassign meaning to it as an icon. And finally, there have been moments when the Palestinian Authority itself invoked the *Fida’i* and Karameh in nationalist discourses to paper over its shrewd cooptation of the struggle and collusion with the occupation apparatus.

The recirculation of the *Fida’i* icon is always an appropriation to a certain extent, but this maneuver can be deployed for widely different projects and purposes. Icons are always unstable and susceptible to appropriation, whether by the comprador class keen on quelling revolutionary objectives, or by the colonial enterprise and its global allies interested in delegitimizing and criminalizing Palestinian resistance. Yet the enduring potency of the *Fida’i* signifies a force larger than any one political group, faction, or ideology, precisely because, despite various erasures and transmutations, it has survived.

Much has transpired in the three decades that have followed the signing of the Oslo Accords. The children of the *Fida’iyyin* are now parents to a new generation whose members are recreating a vibrant anti-colonial struggle, as the Unity Uprising of 2021 profoundly demonstrates. How, then, can the afterlife of the *Fida’i* moment—and the hauntings of its unfulfilled promise—figure into the present? Alongside its other meanings, the *Fida’i* operates as a symbol of hope for everyday people to edify the incomplete dream of liberation and return and to reawaken a mass-based struggle and commitment toward achieving it. More than anything, the icon represents the idea that Palestine will be free and that Palestinians, however many generations later, still maintain the commitment and courage to realize that freedom. However, in relegating the *Fida’i* merely to the status of an icon of liberation rather than a conveyor of a complex history of political movement, we erase that history and the ability to foreground the present in its instructive lessons.

Icons do not appear on posters before they hold the power to change the course of history. *Fida'i* emerged from decades of organizing before it attained its ultimate salience. Additionally, the power an icon carries to consolidate and communicate the aspirations and methods of everyday people is also the very same power that can be weaponized against their interests. In the final instance, *Fida'i* was appropriated by its own founders to change the principles, goals, and strategies they had originally fought for, and to legitimize their power to do so. And finally, the *Fida'i* icon can and has signified many ideals that have been detached from it or subordinated to its surface-level implications—namely, the use of armed struggle and national unity.

Above all, the *Fida'i* represented, both philosophically and organizationally, the grassroots for whom and by whom the revolution was waged. *Fida'i* contested the given contours and boundaries of the nation-state, uniting Palestinians across their dispersions. *Fida'i*'s methods and ideals were shaped by the guidance of Third World struggles and communicated the principles of the Palestinian revolution to the international community, garnering widespread solidarity. *Fida'i* was not only an icon of Palestinian national aspirations, but also a communicator of global decolonial struggles. *Fida'i* represented a social transformation, intergenerational cooperation, and the participation of women, youth, and children in collective liberation.

Recuperating some of these ideals that the *Fida'iyyin* represented in 1968, beyond the emphasis on armed resistance, is critical to reestablishing collective participation in struggle, a renewal of international solidarity, and political engagement from the grassroots up. Such a redemption demands that we tend to the mishaps, contradictions, and disjunctions of the past, and the ugly truths and distortions that erased or remade the *Fida'i*. This process may entail a recuperation of the icon's generative qualities alongside the cocreation of new theories, ideas, and icons in the present that can carry us forward toward a decolonial future.

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