

The PLO, by Jillian Becker

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By Daniel Pipes

Terrorism and Beyond

The PLO: The Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

by Jillian Becker.

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On one level, Jillian Becker successfully achieves her aim in *The PLO*. The book provides a straightforward, factual survey of the PLO's remarkably extensive activities from its founding in January 1964 to late 1983. Miss Becker captures the organization's frenetic pace during those years: its involvement in inter-Arab politics, the challenges it directed to established Arab governments, its role in the founding of contemporary terrorism and as the linchpin of an international terrorist network, its close relations with the Soviet Union, the crises it provoked between the United States and Israel, its long period of control over southern Lebanon, its impact on politics in Israel. Miss Becker's accomplishment, and the power of her book, lie in this fast-paced, cogent, accurate, and full account of the PLO's far-ranging record.

On another level, however, the book strikes me as far less successful. Miss Becker clearly abhors the PLO, and her book is intended as a monument to its evil. Hers is not a scholarly treatise, aspiring to truth as an end in itself, but an intensely polemical work aimed at turning public opinion against the PLO. There is nothing wrong, to be sure, with polemical works, but they must be judged according to their impact. It is in this regard that Miss Becker's work does not succeed—in large part because she ignores the audience she should be addressing.

In my understanding, there are three bodies of opinion in Western Europe and the United States on the PLO. There are those who approve of the organization, the people who lead it, and the goals they aspire to. There are those who reject the PLO and all its works, as they reject all uses of terror and all movements aligned with the Soviet Union. And there are those whose views coincide with portions of both the pro-PLO and the anti-PLO arguments.

These people in the middle tend to condemn PLO tactics but consider the Palestinian issue one with which Israel (and therefore also the United States) must eventually deal. From their perspective, outrage at PLO deeds is compatible with concern that the Palestinian leadership (whether constituted as the PLO or as some other body) be brought into the political process. Adherents of the middle ground deplore past PLO acts but profess themselves open-minded to anything that might lead to a resolution of Palestinian grievances. Needless to say, those in the middle group claim to be the only realists.

Both the pro- and anti-PLO factions, unless they are content to preach to the converted or send out forlorn appeals to the adversary, must consider the middle their target audience, and must tailor their arguments to meet its concerns, in particular the notion that the Palestinian issue lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The pro-PLO faction seems to understand this. It does not waste its breath, for instance, on explaining or justifying PLO behavior, which is beyond redemption in the eyes of the middle. Helena Cobban in *The Palestine Liberation Organization* mentions terror by al-Fatah just once in a 305-page book—and then only to note that the adoption of terror was probably a minority decision within the Fatah leadership. Instead, pro-PLO writers concentrate on two themes: the nature of internal PLO politics (which they find, in the memorable words of Edward Said in *The Question of Palestine*, “more or less improvisatory, in some cases even family-style”), for this legitimizes the organization as a normal political institution; and the need to accommodate the PLO in any solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In making the latter point, they emphasize the importance of the PLO and the absolute inevitability of dealing with it. Whatever one’s feelings about the PLO, they imply, the organization must be contended with.

It would seem logical that anti-PLO writers should similarly concentrate on this point, and respond to it by arguing that the PLO is *not* the key to the Middle East conflict, and that the Arabs and Israel can achieve peace without its blessing. One might expect them to emphasize the fact that it is the Arab states, and especially Syria, which keep the conflict alive, and to show that the PLO exercises a negligible influence over the policies of these Arab states. Finally, one would expect them to point out that Arab leaders are themselves far from unanimous on the question of a PLO state, and that many of them have a vision of Palestine that conflicts with that of the PLO.

Pertinent as this line of argument may be, it is rarely made. Instead, anti-PLO writers—and Miss Becker is a prime example—give in to the temptation to discredit the PLO by cataloguing its outrages. This is a necessary task, but not a sufficient one if the purpose is to influence the middle group which already acknowledges the barbarity of PLO behavior but regards constant reminders of it as a diversion from the really important topic of the future of the Palestinian people.

Miss Becker’s analysis raises another problematic issue. That she spent years of her life learning about the details of the PLO, that she has made it the subject of a full-length book, and that she hopes to focus public attention on it means that she is willy-nilly helping to publicize it and hence to raise its stature. This is, of course, the very antithesis of her intention. But such publicity does lend credence to the PLO claim that it is a major actor in the Middle East. Deprived of this attention, the PLO would undoubtedly lose influence over Arab-Israeli relations.

I do not mean to deny the usefulness of a critical overview of PLO activities, or the need for reminders of its record as a terrorist organization. But this does not override my sense that Miss Becker’s efforts have missed their target, and may even be counterproductive to her purpose.
