

# Exploring Palestinian Weapon Proliferation during the Oslo Peace Process

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*The Oslo peace process created a Palestinian police force for the purposes of law enforcement and preventing terrorism. However, Israel soon accused the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of creating a paramilitary force as a means to spoil the peace process and achieve by force what it could not through negotiations. Others argued that PLO chair Yasir 'Arafat was engaged in coup-proofing the fledgling Palestinian Authority (PA). This article proposes that the PLO's weapons proliferation was meant as an insurance policy to deter Israel from reoccupying the Palestinian Territories.*

"I come bearing an olive branch in one hand, and the freedom fighter's gun in the other."

– Yasir 'Arafat to the United Nations General Assembly, 1974<sup>1</sup>

In 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the first in a series of agreements known as the Oslo Accords after the city negotiations were held in. For the first time, the PLO and Israel recognized each other as legitimate partners, and the PLO agreed to renounce the use of violence. Over the following years, Palestinian autonomy was gradually extended to encompass virtually all Palestinian population centers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The so-called Palestinian Authority (PA), with PLO chair Yasir 'Arafat at its head, assumed civil administration over these areas from Israel, and "a strong police force"<sup>2</sup> comprised mostly of PLO members was established for the prima facie purposes of law enforcement and preventing terrorism. Despite what many saw as an auspicious beginning, the peace process soon faltered.

Israel accused the PLO of proliferating weapons, creating paramilitary forces outside of the scope of agreements, and violating nearly every weapon- and police-related provision of the agreements. Two competing explanations have been given for these breaches. On the one hand, the PLO was accused of acting as a spoiler: using violence tactically to improve their bargaining position, or worse, employing it strategically to cause the peace process to collapse outright. On the other hand, some argued that 'Arafat was engaged in coup-proofing: entrenching his rule by creating competing security

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1. Quoted in Eric N. Budd, "Israeli and Palestinian Peacemakers: Can They Talk the Talk?" in *Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Perspectives on the Peace Process*, eds. Moises F. Salinas and Hazza Abu Rabi (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), p. 105.

2. Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (Oslo I), Israel-PLO, September 13, 1993, Article VIII.

services in an effort to counterbalance potential rivals or creating a bloated security apparatus as a vehicle for patronage. This article proposes a third hypothesis based on documentary evidence and interviews with various high-ranking members of the PLO. Expanding on previous works by Brynjar Lia and Rex Brynen, I argue that the PLO's excess weapons were meant to prevent their outright destruction and guard against their eviction from, or the reoccupation of, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>3</sup> In other words, weapons provided an insurance policy against the ultimate collapse of the peace process.

The PLO took a series of extraordinary and unprecedented risks in signing the Oslo Accords. It relocated within close reach of Israel, its longest-standing and most formidable enemy, and it did so without peacekeepers (unlike the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty). There would be no third party to prevent violations, enforce the agreement, or ensure the safety and survival of the PLO should the peace process collapse. Furthermore, Oslo was an interim agreement, which deferred final status (i.e., Palestinian statehood) until a later date. Until negotiations were complete — and they had not yet started — there was no guarantee of what permanent status would entail or whether it would, in fact, be reached.<sup>4</sup> The Oslo process might be a literal dead end for the PLO.

In sum, the PLO suffered from what Barbara Walter, in her studies of entrenched conflicts, referred to as “commitment problems.”<sup>5</sup> It could not trust that Israel would abide by the terms of the agreement (and vice versa). However, the PLO was able to moderate these risks by proliferating weapons. Despite Israel's overwhelming military superiority, Palestinian weapons provided deterrence against reoccupation and a last line of defense against the PLO's possible eviction or annihilation. When the peace process did collapse, a combination of asymmetric tactics employed by the Palestinians imposed significant costs on Israel. Casualty rates in particular were high enough to cause Israel to question its decision to reoccupy Palestinian lands and evict the PLO, but they were not sufficient for the PLO to achieve meaningful strategic gains against Israel.

I offer an initial test of the weapons-as-insurance hypothesis using three main sources of evidence: First, I put the hypothesis directly to several high-level decision-makers — including nearly all the living Palestinian and Israeli negotiators who participated in the Oslo peace process, their Norwegian mediator, and a former Palestinian security chief — in a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in Israel, the

3. Brynjar Lia, *A Police Force without a State: A History of the Palestinian Security Forces in the West Bank and Gaza* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2006); Rex Brynen, *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank and Gaza* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2000); Rex Brynen, “Palestine: Building Neither Peace Nor State,” in *Building States to Build Peace*, eds. Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), pp. 217–48.

4. While the Oslo Accord spoke of establishing “a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace,” it neither committed Israel to the establishment of a Palestinian state nor to specific borders. Indeed, these were to be established in final status negotiations. Arie M. Kacowicz, “Rashomon in the Middle East: Clashing Narratives, Images, and Frames in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sept. 2005), p. 347.

5. Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 335–64; Barbara F. Walter, “Explaining the Intractability of Territorial Conflict,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Dec. 2003), pp. 137–53; Barbara F. Walter, introduction to *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, eds. Barbara F. Walter and Jack L. Snyder, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 1–12..

West Bank, and East Jerusalem in 2011. Second, I consider the weapons that the PLO acquired during the peace process, in particular, their quantity, quality, whether or not they were used, and if so to what effect. I argue that smaller numbers of light weapons may fend off attack, while larger numbers of heavier weapons are required for offensive purposes.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I evaluate a counterfactual claim: What would have happened to the PLO had it *not* proliferated weapons over the life of the peace process?

This evidence must be treated with the utmost caution. Though counterfactuals are widely accepted as a robust and valid method in the study of international relations,<sup>7</sup> they do not constitute an empirical test of a hypothesis,<sup>8</sup> it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons because of their inherent “dual purpose,”<sup>9</sup> and actors are said to have powerful incentives to withhold or misrepresent private information.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the evidence does not act to discount or otherwise undermine the extant theories of Palestinian weapons proliferation. As such, this article constitutes a “plausibility probe,”<sup>11</sup> an exploratory study of new or relatively untested theories to determine whether further inquiry is warranted.

6. For literature on the utility of weapons in terms of degree and quantity, see Robert Jervis, “Arms Control, Stability, and Causes of War,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (Summer 1993): pp. 239–53; Jack S. Levy, “The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June 1984): pp. 219–38; Bjørn Møller, “Non-Offensive Defence and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, Working Paper 1994/07 (1994); Paul Roe, “The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as a ‘Tragedy’?,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Mar. 1999), pp. 183–202; Randall Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1996), pp. 90–121.

7. Srdjan Vucetic, “Genealogy as a Research Tool in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (July 2011), p. 1,303.

8. Nelson Goodman, “The Problem of Counterfactual Conditionals,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (Feb. 1947), p. 114.

9. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 64; Levy, “Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology;” Bjørn Møller, “Common Security and Non-Offensive Defence as Guidelines for Defence Planning and Arms Control?,” *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 1996): pp. 47–66; Tang Shiping, “Offence-Defence Theory: Towards a Definitive Understanding,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (July 2010), p. 222. See also Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1993); Charles L. Glaser, “Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models,” *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (July 1992), pp. 497–538; Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Jan. 1978), p. 201; John Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994–95), p. 23; Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1993): pp. 27–47; Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth, “The Security Dilemma,” in *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World*, eds. John Baylis and N. J. Rengger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 30.

10. James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414; Edward Schatz (ed.), *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

11. Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in *Case Study Method: Key Issues, Key Texts*, eds. Roger Gomm, Martyn Hammersley, and Peter Foster (London: Sage, 2000), p. 140; Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 75.

The focus of this study is deliberately limited, concentrating on the PLO from 1994, the year they assumed limited control over Gaza and Jericho, until 2000 when the peace process collapsed. I do not address groups that fall outside of the PLO umbrella (e.g., Hamas and Islamic Jihad), groups that splintered from the PLO (e.g., the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades), or the period after Oslo when intra-Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian dynamics changed considerably. While the PLO was also accused of failing to effectively rein in violent rejectionist groups, or even cynically deploying said groups against Israel, such questions remain beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, evidence for the weapons-as-insurance hypothesis fares particularly well when compared to the competing explanations.

The dominance of the two prevailing narratives, spoiling and coup-proofing, has largely squelched any deeper analysis. Indeed, the *Rashomon*-like accounts of what caused the collapse of the peace process have tended to shed more heat than light.<sup>12</sup> By exploring a novel third hypothesis — that the PLO proliferated illicit weapons as a form of insurance — this article attempts to broaden our understanding of the failed attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is not meant to be a monocausal or mutually exclusive argument but is, instead, complimentary. In so doing, this article provides preliminary evidence to support a relatively ambitious claim, which I conclude justifies additional research.

### THE CREATION OF A “STRONG” PALESTINIAN POLICE

On May 4, 1994, the parties signed the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, which precipitated Israeli withdrawal from those areas and the return of the PLO leadership, including Yasir ‘Arafat, from exile. The Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (also known as Oslo II or the Taba Agreement), signed on September 28, 1995, gradually extended self-rule to nearly the entire Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These agreements facilitated the creation of “a strong police force” in those areas under Palestinian rule. At first, the reason given for the creation of a police force was the provision of law and order. Later, with the signing of Oslo II, the mandate of the Palestinian Civil Police was expanded to include joint terrorism prevention with Israel, largely in order to rein in groups like the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Islamic Jihad that did not support the peace process and were anticipated to use violence to undermine it. To this end, the PA set up the General Security Services (GSS), under which various security apparatuses were to be coordinated. These included a range of organizations with varying mandates from civilian police and rescue services to intelligence agencies and paramilitary groups. The latter formed despite explicit prohibitions against the development of armed forces other than police in areas under PA control. Indeed,

12. Compare Myron J. Aronoff, “Camp David Rashomon: Contested Interpretations of the Israel/Palestine Peace Process,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 124, No. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 143–67; Jeremy Pressman, “Visions in Collision: What Happened at Camp David and Taba?,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Fall 2003), pp. 5–43; Shimon Shamir and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (eds.), *Camp David Summit, What Went Wrong?: Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians Analyze the Failure of the Boldest Attempt Ever to Resolve the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2005).

'Arafat himself surreptitiously established two organizations outside of the GSS that answered directly to him, the Special Security Force and the Presidential Security Service (PSS), which became known as Force 17 after the PLO unit it absorbed.<sup>13</sup> In the end, a confusing patchwork of armed groups emerged, some with alleged links to 'Arafat, or 'Arafat's faction of the PLO (e.g., Fatah Tanzim and, after 2000, the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades), and others independent of or even opposed to the PLO (e.g., Hamas and Islamic Jihad).<sup>14</sup>

Under the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, the security services were to number 9,000 lightly armed personnel and strict limits were placed on where the police could be deployed and in what numbers. This number was later expanded to 30,000 under Oslo II.<sup>15</sup> However, estimates suggest that the Palestinian security services swelled to having as many as 60,000 personnel.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the PA was said to have the highest police-to-population ratio of any area in the world.<sup>17</sup> So too did the quantity and quality of weapons exceed the agreed-upon numbers.<sup>18</sup> The Gaza-Jericho Agreement allowed for 7,000 "light personal weapons" and no more than 120 machine guns.<sup>19</sup> Under Oslo II, this was expanded to include an additional 120 machine guns, 4,000 rifles, and 4,000 pistols, numbers picked to limit weapons to one for every two police.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, illegal weapons proliferated.<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Boutwell estimated that

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13. Anthony H. Cordesman, "Palestinian Forces: Palestinian Authority and Militant Forces," Center for Strategic and International Studies (February 9, 2006), [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/media/csis/pubs/060209\\_palestforces.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/060209_palestforces.pdf); Brynjar Lia, *Building Arafat's Police: The Politics of International Police Assistance in the Palestinian Territories after the Oslo Agreement* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2007), pp. 168–70.

14. Jeffrey Boutwell counted 12 different security bodies, while Alaa Tartir counted as many as 15. Jeffrey Boutwell, "The Wild West Bank," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 55, No.1 (1999): p. 41; Alaa Tartir, "The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993–2013," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015), p. 4.

15. Hillel Frisch, *The Palestinian Military: Between Militias and Armies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 74. Tartir suggested that a total of 22,000 police were already on the ground, exceeding the agreed-upon number by 13,000 personnel, see "Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces," p. 4; Lia put the number at 36,000, see *Building Arafat's Police*, pp. 157–58.

16. Gal Luft, "The Palestinian Security Services: Between Police and Army," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch No. 189 (November 13, 1998); Tartir, "Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security" p. 4.

17. Luft, "Palestinian Security Services." Tartir quoted Muhammad Dahlan, then Gaza chief of Palestine Preventive Security, as saying "we have 36,000 people of whom we need only 10,000," see "Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security," p. 5.

18. An Internal PA document circulated in response to the 2001 Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee (known as the Mitchell Report) acknowledge illegal weapons and describe steps to register or eliminate them. "Proposed Measures for Security Implementation" (November 30, 1999), published by Al Jazeera Investigations, *The Palestine Papers*, January 2011, <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/15.PDF>.

19. Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area, Israel-PLO, May 4, 1994, Annex I, Article 5.5b.

20. Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, September 28, 1995, Annex I, Article 4.5b.

21. George Mitchell et al., Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee Report, April 30, 2001, available on the website of the US Department of State, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rpt/3060.htm>. Boutwell, "Wild West Bank," p. 300.

there were as many as 70,000 weapons in circulation by 2002.<sup>22</sup> By 1996, the Israeli government began accusing the PA of not only failing to crack down on the smuggling of illegal weapons,<sup>23</sup> but even of being complicit in their import, for example through the manipulation of diplomatic status.<sup>24</sup>

No Palestinian police recruits could be implicated in serious crimes or terror, and the agreements required the PA to remit the names of potential recruits to Israel for vetting and register their weapons with Israel. Despite repeated Israeli requests, this never occurred.<sup>25</sup> In the end, the Palestinian security services were largely drawn from the ranks of the PLO's armed wing, the Palestine Liberation Army. Additionally, few sustained efforts were made by the PA to disarm illegal groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as required by the agreements.<sup>26</sup> By 1996, Israeli intelligence was reporting that the PA was actively engaged in training its police in paramilitary tactics, contrary to its mission, and preparing the civilian population for clashes with Israeli forces.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, the PLO proliferated weapons, created multiple overlapping security agencies, filled their ranks with cadres whom Israel considered to be former terrorists, failed to reign in violent rejectionists, and prepared for conflict with Israel. Meant to create "a strong police force," the PLO had instead assembled a patchwork of over-armed and sometimes competing militias, contrary to the terms of the agreements.

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22. Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 297.

23. Binyamin Netanyahu won the 1996 Israeli prime ministerial election on an anti-Oslo platform in which Palestinian weapons played a central role. Indeed, a common slogan used during the elections was "*al timu lahem rovim*" ("do not give them [the Palestinians] guns"), see Moshe Zak, "Solomon's Stables and Stability," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), October 11, 1996, p. 4) Once in office, Palestinian weapons remained a top priority. Netanyahu insisted on strengthening existing provisions prohibiting illegal weapons and armed groups other than the Palestinian police during the Wye River negotiations and later used the PLO's failure to do so as a pretext to slow the peace process and stall further Israeli redeployments from the West Bank. Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," p. 294. In the same article, Boutwell cited a 1996 Israeli government publication entitled "Major PLO Violations of the Oslo Accords," available at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website at [www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/mfadocuments/pages/major%20plo%20violations%20of%20the%20oslo%20accords%20-%202025-oct-.aspx](http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/mfadocuments/pages/major%20plo%20violations%20of%20the%20oslo%20accords%20-%202025-oct-.aspx).

24. These weapons were introduced through various channels. Large shipments of weapons were smuggled across the borders from neighboring Arab states. Boutwell, "The Wild West Bank," pp. 41–44. See also Boutwell, "Weaponization," pp. 293–300; Jeffrey Boutwell, "A Gusher of Illegal Weapons," *The Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1998, <https://lat.ms/217Az0W>; Lia, *Building Arafat's Police*, p. 181. However, some of these weapons originated within Israel itself. Cases of weapons being looted from military armories by Israelis were reported, as were cases of Israeli underworld figures smuggling weapons into the Palestinian Territories. Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," pp. 293, 300; Susan Goldenberg, "Guns for Sale: How Stolen Israeli Weapons Arm Fatah's Fighters," *The Guardian* (UK), December 16, 2000, [www.guardian.com/world/2000/dec/16/israel](http://www.guardian.com/world/2000/dec/16/israel).

25. Lia, *Building Arafat's Police*, 2007, p. 180. This provision was revised to legitimate facts on the ground. Oslo II read that no police could have been "involved in terrorist activities *subsequent* to their recruitment," Frisch, *Palestinian Military*, p. 75 (emphasis added).

26. Frisch, *Palestinian Military*, pp. 75, 83; Lia, *A Police Force without a State*, 2006, pp. 378, 381.

27. Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," p. 294.

*SPOILING AND COUP-PROOFING*

Two primary explanations have been given for these violations. First, some claimed that the PLO was engaged in spoiling the peace process, employing violence to gain strategic advantage and increase their bargaining leverage or to undermine the peace process outright.<sup>28</sup> In his campaign for the 1996 Israeli election, for example, Binyamin Netanyahu warned that the PLO had not abandoned the armed struggle and would turn its weapons on Israel when it was in its interest to do so.<sup>29</sup> And after the peace process collapsed at Camp David in 2000, both Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and United States president Bill Clinton blamed ‘Arafat for the failure of the talks and the half-decade-long convulsion of violence that followed. Both claimed that the Israeli delegation offered an unprecedentedly generous deal to the Palestinians, which they summarily rejected in favor of renewed violence.<sup>30</sup> In this account, the PLO was not prepared to make peace with Israel. It accumulated weapons and used violence either to derail the peace process or in a misguided effort to improve their bargaining position and extract additional concessions from Israel.

Second, Hillel Frisch and Gal Luft both argued that ‘Arafat proliferated weapons and created multiple overlapping and competing security agencies for the purposes of coup-proofing.<sup>31</sup> When civil society is weak and the governing regime lacks legitimacy, as it did in the PA, coups are more likely to occur.<sup>32</sup> Under such conditions, the literature on coup-proofing suggests that leaders will insulate themselves from challengers and entrench their positions through various strategies, including engaging in diversionary wars that are said to generate a rally-’round-the-flag effect,<sup>33</sup> “stacking” key institutions

28. For a comprehensive discussion of spoilers, see Stephen John Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 5–53; Wendy Pearlman, “Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Winter 2009), pp. 79–109.

29. Lia, *Building Arafat’s Police*, p. 181; Boutwell, “Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process,” pp. 293, 300; Goldenberg, “Guns for Sale.”

30. Shlomo Ben-Ami, “So Close and yet so Far : Lessons from the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process,” *Israel Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer 2005), pp. 72–90; Mitchell et al., “Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee Report;” Benny Morris, “Camp David and After: An Exchange (1. An Interview with Ehud Barak),” June 13, 2002, [www.nybooks.com/articles/2002/06/13/camp-david-and-after-an-exchange-1-an-interview-wi/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2002/06/13/camp-david-and-after-an-exchange-1-an-interview-wi/); Pressman, “Visions in Collision;” Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Gilead Sher, *The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations, 1999–2001: Within Reach* (London: Routledge, 2006); Deborah Sontag, “Quest for Middle East Peace: How and Why It Failed,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2001, <https://nyti.ms/2BOSsYM>.

31. Frisch, *Palestinian Military*; Luft, “Palestinian Security Services.”

32. Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, “Toward a Structural Understanding of Coup Risk,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (Oct. 2003), p. 595; Peter D. Feaver, “Civil-Military Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 1999): pp. 211–14; Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 1–15; Jonathan Powell, “Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups d’État,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (Dec. 2012), pp. 1,017–40.

33. Jonathan M. Powell, “Regime Vulnerability and the Diversionary Threat of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Feb. 2014), pp. 169–96; Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “General Deterrence between Enduring Rivals: Testing Three Competing Models,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87,

with loyalists,<sup>34</sup> counterbalancing actors and institutions,<sup>35</sup> exercising divide and rule,<sup>36</sup> distributing patronage, and others.

In this account, ‘Arafat created the admixture of paramilitaries in order to counterbalance one another as well as those groups that were not under the umbrella of the PLO, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.<sup>37</sup> The chain of command was created such that the heads of each of the security services reported to ‘Arafat directly, rather than a civilian body.<sup>38</sup> By creating a balance among and between various factions, ‘Arafat aimed to guard against possible coups, mutinies, or insubordination. The security services’ power was diffuse; none of the paramilitary organizations were strong enough to challenge ‘Arafat’s rule directly, but together the various factions loyal to him were strong enough to ward off threats from competitors. ‘Arafat was said to maintain loyalty among the various paramilitaries through a system of patronage and corruption. Many more police were hired than needed, salaries were paid in cash directly by Arafat, and loyalists were rewarded.<sup>39</sup> ‘Arafat further kept the various paramilitaries in check by having them spy on each other<sup>40</sup> and, in some extreme cases, using violence against challengers.<sup>41</sup>

### WEAPONS AS INSURANCE

The main hypothesis of credible commitment theory is that actors often have difficulties reaching mutually beneficial solutions because they are unable to convince each other that they will continue to act cooperatively in the future.<sup>42</sup> As Randall Schweller noted, “today’s friend may be tomorrow’s enemy.”<sup>43</sup> This may be because actors are cynical or because of “time-inconsistent preferences.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the

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No. 1 (Mar. 1993), p. 66; Matthew A. Baum, “The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (June 2002), pp. 263–98.

34. Bruce W. Farcau, *The Coup: Tactics in the Seizure of Power* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 121–44; J. T. Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 131–65.

35. Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Böhmelt, “Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967–99,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Sept. 2011), pp. 335–49; Powell, “Determinants of the Attempting” pp. 1,017, 1,033.

36. Belkin and Schofer, “Toward a Structural Understanding,” p. 596; Powell, “Determinants of the Attempting,” p. 1,025.

37. Frisch, *Palestinian Military*; interview by the author with Israeli Oslo negotiator, Yair Hirschfeld, 2012, Tel Aviv; Luft, “Palestinian Security Services.”

38. Tartir, “Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security,” p. 4; Francesco Strazzari and Simone Tholens, “Another Nakba: Weapons Availability and the Transformation of the Palestinian National Struggle, 1987–2007,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (May 2010), pp. 121, 123.

39. Rex Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*, pp. 28–29, 53; Cordesman, “Palestinian Forces,” pp. 6–39; Lia, *Building Arafat’s Police*, pp. 152–53; Tartir, “Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security,” pp. 1–2.

40. Tartir, “Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security” p. 4.

41. Frisch claimed that the Fatah Hawks (Tanzim) played an important role protecting the PA from challenges posed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad as well as from internal challengers like Ahmad Tabuq, see *Palestinian Military*, pp. 82, 85.

42. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” p. 408.

43. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-Quo Bias,” p. 101.

44. Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality* (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 65–76.

fear of defection prevents them from realizing desirable outcomes. The problem is particularly acute in agreements to terminate conflict, where defection might imperil the survival of actors. Indeed, it often leads violent conflict to persist even when belligerents wish to terminate it.<sup>45</sup>

However, cooperation is possible even when trust is low. Scholars have described numerous strategies actors employ to remediate the credible commitment problem: First, leaders can introduce domestic audience costs. For example, they can make promises such that they would be open to criticism and lose public support if they reneged, thereby raising the price of defection.<sup>46</sup> Second, leaders can send costly signals of their desire to cooperate. Andrew Kydd defined costly signals as “small, unilateral cooperative gestures that . . . involve some vulnerability on the part of the side that makes them.”<sup>47</sup> Costly signaling works by “persuading the other side that one is trustworthy by virtue of the fact that they are so costly that one would hesitate to send them if one were untrustworthy.”<sup>48</sup> Third, actors can delegate enforcement to an external party.<sup>49</sup> Finally, actors can balance against the source of the commitment problem. Balancing is the attempt to equalize power, making it more difficult and, therefore, less likely that others will take advantage of an actor or otherwise defect from an agreement. Balancing encompasses a range of activities, including diplomacy, alliance formation, and, most crucially, military preparation.<sup>50</sup> Weapons are one such instrument, particularly in cases where defection from an agreement would have an impact on survival prospects.<sup>51</sup>

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45. Walter, “Critical Barrier;” Walter, “Explaining the Intractability;” Walter & Snyder (eds.), *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*.

46. See James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Cost,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Feb. 1997), pp. 68–90; Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Oct. 2007), pp. 821–40.

47. Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2000), p. 333.

48. Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” p. 326.

49. See Walter, “Critical Barrier;” Barbara F. Walter, “Designing Transitions from Civil War: Demobilization, Democratization, and Commitments to Peace,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 127–55; Walter, “Explaining the Intractability.”

50. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 130, 163–70, 180–83, 241–42. For more on balancing, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton, 2001); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, fourth edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987). On diplomacy, see Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 7–45; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 72–108; and for alliance-formation specifically, see Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985): pp. 3–43

51. Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, “From Anarchy to Security: Comparing Theoretical Approaches to the Process of Disarmament Following Civil War,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2006), p. 156; Roe, “The Intrastate Security Dilemma,” p. 186; Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis, “Civil War and the Security Dilemma,” in *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, eds. Walter and Snyder, pp. 15–37; Barbara F. Walter, “Designing Transitions from Civil War,” in *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, eds. Walter and Snyder, p. 62.

Weapons can be used to repel attacks, hold territory, and extract resources necessary for survival. Even small numbers of weapons may suffice for these purposes. Contrary to the claims of offensive realists, who argue that security-seekers strive for a preponderance of power in order to ensure their survival, actors may tolerate asymmetries without compromising their security. Indeed, they may prevail against more powerful actors by employing the tactics of guerilla warfare.<sup>52</sup> In so doing, weapons change the calculus of the credible commitment problem. By providing defense, they deter defection from an agreement, thereby allowing actors greater freedom to engage in risky activities. Unlike third-party enforcement, which delegates the commitment problem, weapons provide the means for self-help, which actors are often said to seek under conditions of anarchy.<sup>53</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Fearing the collapse of a tenuous peace process, which would return the parties to a de facto state of armed conflict, and mindful of its past history, the PLO undertook a series of steps to ensure its survival. Most importantly, the PLO accumulated weapons in the hands of a loose network of paramilitaries and civilians and undertook the task of training them in insurgency tactics as an insurance policy against any future effort to evict, decapitate, or destroy the organization. The proliferation of weapons in contravention of the agreements, however, was not the first recourse taken by the PLO but was pursued only after other preferred methods, such as third-party guarantees, were refused by Israeli negotiators. When the process did in fact collapse after the Camp David summit in 2000 and the conflict resumed, Israeli leaders publicly entertained the idea of destroying the PLO and removing 'Arafat.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the PLO's worst fears were realized when Israel began taking steps to do so as part of Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. In the end, however, these actions proved extremely costly for Israel. While

52. Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 93–128; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (Feb. 2003), pp. 75–90; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jan. 2009), pp. 67–106; Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Jan. 1975): pp. 175–200; Patricia L. Sullivan, "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (June 2007), pp. 496–524; Patricia L. Sullivan and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945–2003," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (Sept. 2009), pp. 707–18.

53. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 95–118; Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), p. 397.

54. James Bennet, "Israel Announces Official Decision to Remove Arafat," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2003, <https://nyti.ms/2Ea1kK2>. For example, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's senior advisor Ra'anan Gissin was quoted saying that 'Arafat's "days are numbered" and Sharon himself was quoted saying that 'Arafat would share the fate of Shaykh Ahmad Yasin and 'Abd al-'Aziz Rantisi (Hamas leaders who had been once exiled and were killed by Israel in targeted assassination operations) shortly after Israel's second largest daily, *Maariv*, ran an editorial entitled "Don't Fear Expelling Arafat" in its pages, cited in John Kifner, "Mideast Turmoil: The Aftermath; Battered but Defiant, Arafat Surveys the Damage," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2002, <https://nyti.ms/2CltQYN>.

Israel enjoyed overwhelming military superiority, it found that it could not destroy the PLO without high casualty rates and international opprobrium.<sup>55</sup> Using guerilla tactics, the Palestinians forced Israel to reconsider its plans to destroy the PLO.

From their defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, to their eviction from Egypt after the 1970 death of President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, and the civil wars in Jordan and Lebanon, the Palestinian nationalist movement had narrowly escaped complete destruction several times in the past. In relocating to the West Bank and Gaza, Yasir 'Arafat and the PLO had knowingly assumed the greatest risk in the history of the organization. The PLO had signed an interim agreement in advance of an as-yet-to-be-negotiated final agreement, affording them only tenuous status in areas vacated by Israel. Israel retained overall security control as well as the inherent ability to halt or even reverse the process.<sup>56</sup> In the words of Israeli negotiator Ron Pundak, "the Israeli negotiators were told to keep all options open, from a Palestinian state to continued occupation."<sup>57</sup>

More importantly, in returning to the West Bank and Gaza, the PLO had concentrated both its leadership and rank and file within close reach of the Israeli security apparatus. In so doing, the PLO risked complete defeat and possible annihilation. Jibril Rajoub, former West Bank head of the Palestine Preventive Security service, noted, "bringing back the whole political leadership made us vulnerable to Israeli aggression."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Israel had no intention of remaining idle if the agreement collapsed. Oslo negotiator Joel Singer stated Israel's position clearly: "we maintained ultimate military authority. This was Rabin's vision. The gradual process was intended to stop the transfer of authority if the Palestinians were not capable of doing their job. And obviously if worse comes to worse military planning takes into account the possibility of going back again."<sup>59</sup> Reports later surfaced in the foreign press of a secret Israeli contingency plan, dubbed Operation Thorn Field, to forcibly dismantle the PA, exile its leadership, and reinstitute the military occupation of Palestinian lands.<sup>60</sup>

The Oslo process did involve various strategies to address the credible commitment problem, including costly signaling and the introduction of domestic audience costs. Most notably, Israel agreed to a series of so-called confidence building measures, including repealing the law banning contact with the PLO, recognizing them as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," releasing Palestinian prisoners, and transferring territory. The PLO had also requested the introduction of third parties for the purposes of enforcing the agreements, both in the initial Oslo ne-

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55. Uri Ben-Eliezer, *Old Conflict, New War: Israel's Politics toward the Palestinians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 123–40.

56. Interview by the author with Israeli Oslo negotiator Ron Pundak, 2012, Tel Aviv; telephone interview by the author with Israeli Oslo negotiator Joel Singer, March 21, 2012.

57. Interview, 2012, Tel Aviv.

58. Interview by the author, April 23, 2013, Ramallah, West Bank.

59. Phone interview, Mar. 2012.

60. Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," p. 293; Dean Andromidas, "Field of Thorns: Sharon to Expel Palestinians," *Executive Intelligence Review*, Vol. 29, No. 38 (October 4, 2002): pp. 52–54; introduction to *Between the Lines: Readings on Israel, the Palestinians, and the U.S. "War on Terror"*, eds. Tikvah Honig-Parnass and Toufic Haddad (Chicago: Haymarket, 2007), p. 49.

gotiations and again after the breakdown of the process.<sup>61</sup> However, Israel demurred; it would allow temporary monitors but cut short any discussion of third-party enforcement, seeing it as an unwanted constraint, according to Israeli negotiators.<sup>62</sup> Israel objected to any effort that would “internationalize” the process, which they believed would act to restrict their actions, both militarily and politically. In the words of Yossi Beilin, Israel’s deputy foreign minister from 1992 to 1995, Israel simply “didn’t trust international forces.”<sup>63</sup>

If the peace process were to collapse without a final status agreement, the PLO would have no one to turn to prevent their possible annihilation or eviction, as they had previously done in Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>64</sup> However, the proliferation of weapons and combatants constituted a self-help mechanism to ensure its survival.<sup>65</sup> The multiple armed groups, many of which were trained in paramilitary tactics, coupled with a civilian population that had been prepared for clashes with Israel,

61. Karin Aggestam, “From Theory to Practice: Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH),” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001), p. 54; Lia, *A Police Force without a State*, p. 98; telephone interview by the author with Norwegian Oslo mediator Terje Rød-Larsen, April 11, 2012; phone interview, Singer, Mar. 2012.

62. Aggestam, “From Theory to Practice,” pp. 60–64; interview by the author with former Israeli deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin, April 4, 2012, Herzliya, Israel; interview, Hirschfeld, 2012, Tel Aviv; interview, Pundak, 2012, Tel Aviv; phone interview, Rød-Larsen, Apr. 2012; phone interview, Singer, 2012. In the wake of the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, in which a Jewish terrorist killed 29 Palestinian worshippers in Hebron, United Nations Security Council Resolution 904 was passed, leading to the establishment of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH). Meant to provide Palestinians with a feeling of security, the TIPH provided only for surveillance and monitoring by 50–60 staff and not the power to intervene forcefully to keep the peace (i.e., peacekeeping or peace enforcement). Their temporary presence was repeatedly renewed but has since expired. Hillel Frisch, “Debating Palestinian Strategy in the Al-Aqsa Intifada,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 76.

63. Interview, Apr. 2012, Herzliya. This is perhaps not surprising given Israel’s deep mistrust of the UN. The world’s first peacekeeping mission was stationed along Israel’s borders after the 1948 war to monitor the armistice. Their presence, however, failed to prevent future wars. Indeed, the 1967 war broke out after the first UN Emergency Force withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula on the request of Egypt, and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, which was established in southern Lebanon, is viewed as porous, allowing terrorist attacks through. Moreover, Israel has been the subject of more critical resolutions at the UN and its various member agencies than any other nation. Aggestam, “From Theory to Practice,” p. 54; Raphael N. Becker et al., “The Preoccupation of the United Nations with Israel: Evidence and Theory,” *The Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Dec. 2015), pp. 413–37.

64. The PLO escaped to Lebanon and narrowly avoided complete annihilation at the hands of the Jordanian army in part because of the intervention of the Syrian army and the threat of intervention by Iraq and the Soviet Union. Just over a decade later, in 1982, the PLO was evicted from its new home in Lebanon, this time by the Israeli army. Once again, the PLO narrowly avoided total defeat and was allowed to relocate under the supervision of a multinational force. For more, see Barry Rubin, *Revolution until Victory? The Politics and History of the PLO* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

65. In addition to proliferating weapons and combatants, the PLO also prepared civilians and civilian infrastructure for conflict with Israel. Emergency rooms were renovated to handle large numbers of wounded, alternate water and electrical systems were built, self-defense courses were offered, including shooting lessons, hand-to-hand combat training, and first aid, and private rates of gun ownership were allowed to skyrocket. Luft, “Palestinian Security Services;” International Crisis Group, “Who Governs the West Bank? Palestinian Administration under Israeli Occupation,” Middle East Report No. 32 (September 28, 2004), p. 18.

was a redundant and decentralized hydra, capable of continued fighting in the absence of a central leadership. Even if the PLO leadership was killed or evicted, as they had been in the past, this organizational model ensured that militants would remain, fighting would continue, and Israel would not experience quiet. In so doing, the PLO had created the capability to “Lebanonize” the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>66</sup> Though not capable of achieving meaningful military gains, the PLO could inflict costly damage to make Israeli ground incursions or a long-term reoccupation of Palestinian lands painful, particularly for the Israeli civilian population — a notoriously casualty-averse group.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Luft argued that a high rate of casualties would “deflate Israel’s national morale,” causing it to reevaluate any potential action against the PLO, much as they had been forced to do against Hizbullah in southern Lebanon.<sup>68</sup> “The right [of self-defense] is part of our strategy” Rajoub explained, “the Israelis will never enjoy settlements, occupation, and security. And all of the scenarios will be on the table and we have nothing to lose.”<sup>69</sup> Tariq Zayd, Chief of the Palestinian Police in Hebron, put it more clearly, “the Israeli army will not come back again. They know the Palestinians would fight with their lives and many [Israelis] would die.”<sup>70</sup>

Here history has provided us something of a natural experiment. In 2002, Israel launched an assault on the Palestinian Territories in response to the violence that followed the collapse of the Camp David peace talks. Named Operation Defensive Shield, it was the largest military operation since Israel captured the Territories in the 1967 war, and the largest overall mobilization of army reserve forces since the 1982 Lebanon War. The operation looked remarkably similar to the leaked contingency plan Operation Thorn Field. Within months, the PLO was devastated. Israel had reoccupied most of “Area A,” which had been solely administered by the PA under the Oslo Accords and included the six largest Palestinian cities, confiscated thousands of weapons, rounded up nearly three quarters of the Palestinian police, instituted a series of enhanced checkpoints, restricted the movement of goods and people, and imposed strict curfews on population centers. Israel imposed a maritime blockade on Gaza, sealed the border with Egypt, severed the links between Gaza and the West Bank, and closed off Palestinian airspace. Furthermore, Israel destroyed much of the PA’s physical infrastructure (including nearly all of its security-related facilities) and placed much of the PA leadership under siege (in particular, ‘Arafat was confined to his headquarters until his death in 2004).<sup>71</sup> Israeli actions reached a high-water mark when the cabinet later adopted the decision to “remove” ‘Arafat.

66. Luft, “Palestinian Security Services.”

67. On sensitivities to casualties, see Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Hugh Smith, “What Costs Will Democracies Bear? A Review of Popular Theories of Casualty Aversion,” *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer 2005), pp. 487–512. For Israel specifically, see Yagil Levy, *Israel’s Death Hierarchy: Casualty Aversion in a Militarized Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

68. Luft, “Palestinian Security Services.”

69. Interview, Apr. 2013, Ramallah.

70. Quoted in Luft, “Palestinian Security Services.”

71. Conal Urquhart, “Sharon: ‘We May Kill Arafat’,” *The Guardian*, April 23, 2004, [www.guardian.com/world/2004/apr/24/israel](http://www.guardian.com/world/2004/apr/24/israel).

However, Palestinian civilians and militants alike proved resilient. The decentralized organizational structure of the various Palestinian armed groups were able to continually harass the Israeli army and civilian population even as Israel delivered them punishing blows. Unlike the first intifada, which was “fought largely with ‘rocks and Molotov cocktails’,” Boutwell wrote, this one was fought with “weapons and combat techniques that [were] entirely military.”<sup>72</sup> Following the insurgency playbook, Palestinian militants were, by then, deeply embedded in the surrounding civilian population, rarely wore uniforms, and would disappear underground when not fighting.<sup>73</sup>

At first, Israel responded by intensifying its ground incursions and adopting a series of increasingly heavy-handed and indiscriminate measures to clear areas of militants. Palestinian civilians — among whom the militants were often embedded — tended to face the brunt of these tactics.<sup>74</sup> As a result, Israel came under increasing scrutiny and international pressure. In particular, Israel faced widespread criticism for the devastation it visited on population centers and its use of what was often described as “collective punishment.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the European Union took the unprecedented move of threatening sanctions against Israel. Israel found itself facing a dilemma: In combatting the Palestinians it could use less discriminatory tactics and face international opprobrium, or it could put its own soldiers increasingly in harm’s way. In either case, it was becoming abundantly clear that costly military actions on the ground would do little more than slow the pace of violence. Despite weakening the PA to the point of near collapse, organized violence would persist.

Finding itself between Scylla and Charybdis, Israel reluctantly accepted (i.e., with extensive reservations) the so-called Roadmap for Peace, a deal brokered by the Quartet on the Middle East, which included the EU, US, United Nations, and Russia. In so doing, Israel agreed to quit the Palestinian cities it had reoccupied during Operation Defensive Shield, limited further ground incursions into Palestinian areas, muted its threats to evict the PLO and “remove” ‘Arafat, and turned to other means to address Palestinian violence.<sup>76</sup> Defensive Shield revealed the limits of Israeli military power. Despite Israel’s overwhelming military superiority, it could not altogether prevent terror attacks directed at its civilian population, fully quiet the restive Territories, or effectively reassert control over previously vacated Palestinian lands without paying an excessively burdensome cost both at home and abroad — an axiom of asymmetric warfare.

72. Boutwell, “Wild West Bank,” p. 294.

73. Cordesman, “Palestinian Forces,” p. 11; Anthony H. Cordesman, *Peace and War: The Arab-Israeli Military Balance Enters the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), pp. 226–59; Gal Luft, “The Palestinian H-Bomb: Terror’s Winning Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (July–Aug. 2002), pp. 2–7.

74. Mitchell et al., “Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee Report.”

75. United Nations General Assembly, Resolution ES-10/10, *Illegal Israeli Actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the Rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (May 14, 2002), [www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/ES-10/10](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/ES-10/10).

76. In the months that followed, Israel began constructing a security barrier to wall itself off from the Palestinians, stationed its troops at checkpoints and other installations outside of Palestinian population centers, switched from large-scale ground incursions to aerial strikes (the so-called policy of targeted assassinations), and eventually withdrew completely to the perimeter of the Gaza Strip (the so-called unilateral disengagement). See Moshe Yaalon, “Lessons from the Palestinian ‘War’ against Israel,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus No. 64 (Jan. 2007).

We might pause here to consider a counterfactual: what would have happened to the PLO if it had *not* amassed arms over the life of the peace process? The Israeli army made quick work of PA institutions during Defensive Shield. Not surprisingly, the Israeli army was able to reduce Palestinian infrastructure, dismantle its (legal) police force, and isolate PLO leadership within weeks of launching the operation. There was little the fledgling PLO could do to halt the Israeli army — much less achieve strategic gain — in a head-to-head military confrontation.<sup>77</sup> Using guerilla tactics, however, Palestinian militants were able to raise the cost of Israeli incursions. Had the PLO *not* had this capacity, it not only would have been feasible but also entirely likely that Israel would have followed through on the plans to destroy or evict the PLO, as articulated in Operation Thorn Field and as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon had done previously.

The weapons-as-insurance hypothesis stacks up particularly well when compared to the evidence provided for spoiling and coup-proofing. While space does not permit us to fully evaluate these claims, a few points are worth noting here: First, though Clinton and Barak claimed that 'Arafat walked away from a generous deal at Camp David, a preponderance of the accounts offered by Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans present at the talks suggest that the Israeli offer was not as generous as initially portrayed.<sup>78</sup> Second, it was Israel, *not* the Palestinians, who ultimately abandoned peace negotiations. Despite having made considerable headway after Camp David,<sup>79</sup> neither Barak nor Ariel Sharon, who would succeed him as prime minister, would attend the scheduled follow up negotiations at Sharm al-Shaykh.<sup>80</sup> Third, a compelling argument can be made that it was Israel, and not the Palestinians, who initiated the violence. While negotiations were still ongoing, Ariel Sharon, then leader of the right-wing opposition Likud party, paid a highly publicized visit to the contested Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif accompanied by a massive retinue of police. The visit sparked a wave of rioting across East Jerusalem that Israel responded to with overwhelming force and live ammunition.<sup>81</sup> Fourth, Palestinian violence lacked coherence and was without obvious strategic aim or direction. The violence appeared improvised, not demonstrating any obvious offensive tactics.<sup>82</sup> Attacks were sometimes confined to the Occupied Territories and at other times reached deep into Israel. Civilians were targeted one day, military installations the next, and Jewish settlements on another. Fifth, if the PLO had a premeditated plan to spoil the peace process, one wonders why they failed to introduce

77. Pressman, "Visions in Collision," p. 26.

78. See Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 48, No. 13 (August 9, 2001), [www.nybooks.com/articles/2001/08/09/camp-david-the-tragedy-of-errors/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2001/08/09/camp-david-the-tragedy-of-errors/); Akram Hanieh, "The Camp David Papers," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Winter 2001), pp. 75–97; Pressman, "Visions in Collision;" Sontag, "Quest for Middle East Peace;" Clayton E. Swisher, *The Truth about Camp David: The Untold Story about the Collapse of the Middle East Peace Process*, first edition (New York: Nation Books, 2004).

79. See Miguel Moratinos, "European Union Non-Paper on the Taba Conference" (January 27, 2001), available on the website of the UN Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/CEA3EFD8C0AB482F85256E3700670AF8>; Sontag, "Quest for Middle East Peace."

80. Pressman, "Visions in Collision," p. 9; Sontag, "Quest for Middle East Peace."

81. Pressman, "Visions in Collision," p. 28.

82. Frisch, "Debating Palestinian Strategy;" Luft, "Palestinian Security Services;" Yezid Sayigh, "Arafat and the Autonomy of a Revolt," *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2001), pp. 47–60.

more potent weapons before the violence resumed. The period preceding the failure of Camp David was an otherwise missed opportunity to increase their military strength. While several lackluster attempts were in fact made to smuggle better (i.e., heavier strategic) weapons (e.g., aboard small vessels such as the *Santorini* and the *Karine A* in 2001 and 2002, respectively)<sup>83</sup> or produce them locally,<sup>84</sup> such efforts only occurred after the start of the violence. Sixth, one might ask if the aim of the violence was to spoil, as Israeli and American accounts suggest, why would the Palestinians reject the Israeli offer at Camp David and then engage in military conflict? In other words, why would they not take the deal *and then spoil*? In fact, the PLO's Ten Point Program (or Phased Plan) of 1974 called for just such an approach: the piecemeal liberation of Palestine through a combination of violence and peacemaking. By not accepting the Israeli offer at Camp David, the PLO abandoned an opportunity to secure a strategic advantage with which to fight Israel.<sup>85</sup> Lastly, one of the key findings of the coup-proofing literature is that the strategies used to mitigate coup risk tend to have deleterious effects on fighting capacity.<sup>86</sup> For example, divide-and-rule strategies lead to coordination problems, ethnic stacking breeds a lack of professionalism, and under-resourcing contributes to poor training, bad morale, and insufficient equipment. In this case, however, no such negative effects were seen. Indeed, the militias proved perfectly capable of sustaining an effective guerrilla campaign.

## CONCLUSION

With the onset of the Oslo peace process in 1993, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) agreed to terminate its armed struggle against Israel and enlist its weapons in the fight against terrorism and the provision of law and order. Instead, the PLO built a bloated security apparatus far beyond its policing requirements and was later implicated in turning its weapons against Israel. This is often cited as evidence that the PLO had neither embraced the nascent peace process nor abandoned the use of force. While the accumulation and use of weapons by the PLO in contravention of the agreements certainly qualifies as cheating, it does not constitute robust evidence of spoiling or coup-proofing. Had the PLO intended to spoil, we would expect them to accumulate

83. Boutwell, "Wild West Bank," p. 42; Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," p. 295; Boutwell, "Gusher of Illegal Weapons;" Strazzari and Tholens, "Another Nakba," pp. 9, 11, 13.

84. Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," p. 296; Strazzari and Tholens, "Another Nakba," p. 122; Judah Ari Gross, "Say Hello to 'Carlo,' the Cheap, Lethal Go-to Gun for Terrorists," *The Times of Israel*, March 16, 2016, [www.timesofisrael.com/say-hello-to-carlo-the-cheap-lethal-go-to-gun-for-terrorists/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/say-hello-to-carlo-the-cheap-lethal-go-to-gun-for-terrorists/); Peter Beaumont, "Homemade Guns Used in Palestinian Attacks on Israelis," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2016, [www.gu.com/world/2016/mar/14/homemade-guns-carl-gustav-used-in-palestinian-attacks-on-israelis](http://www.gu.com/world/2016/mar/14/homemade-guns-carl-gustav-used-in-palestinian-attacks-on-israelis).

85. Jeremy Pressman attributed this line of argumentation to Stephen Van Evera, see "Visions in Collision," p. 25.

86. Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness: A Deeper Look," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Aug. 2004), p. 532; Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1996), pp. 171–212; Pilster and Böhmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness;": Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing," pp. 155–58.

higher quality weapons long in advance of the failure of the peace process. But they did not. The PLO contented itself mostly with small arms and failed to accumulate strategic weapons, such as missiles, which could effectively alter the balance of power. And while the number of weapons that the Palestinian Authority (PA) accumulated was far more than what it would need for law enforcement, it was an insufficient amount to achieve strategic gains against Israel. Moreover, one is inclined to wonder what type of unorthodox spoiling would lead the Palestinians to refuse concessions from Israel at Camp David. Indeed, the PLO would have been well-served by accepting Israel's offer at Camp David *and then spoiling*. Instead, the PLO continued negotiating until Israel walked away from the table. That there was some measure of high-level complicity in the violence, including incitement and failing to rein in violent rejectionist groups, is beyond doubt. However, in turning their weapons on Israel, the PLO failed to achieve any strategic or tactical gains. Indeed, the violence failed to achieve any political aim articulated by the PLO — quite the contrary, as Palestinian statehood now appears more distant than ever — but it did cause Israel to rethink its plans to reoccupy the Palestinian Territories or evict the PLO.

The extant explanations for the proliferation of weapons belie the serious danger the PLO encountered in returning to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. If the peace process collapsed, the PLO risked serious reversals that could threaten their long-term survival. Despite Palestinian pleas, Oslo included no third parties to enforce the agreements and Israel reserved the right to exercise the use of military force as it saw fit, weakening the signals that it was sending to the PLO at the same time. Absent robust guarantees, the PLO turned to a self-help mechanism to moderate the risks associated with the peace process. In addition to assembling “a strong police force,” the PLO proliferated weapons and combatants in excess of the agreed upon numbers. I argue that weapons provided the PLO insurance against their outright destruction at the hands of Israel. “Don’t test us,” chief Palestinian negotiator Sa’eb ‘Erekat remarked to me, “we will surprise you.”<sup>87</sup>

And, indeed, they did.

When the process collapsed and violence resumed, Israel began reoccupying the West Bank and Gaza. Within a short time, however, Israel had largely retreated from Palestinian lands, leaving the PLO battered but alive. Israel did not reverse itself because of sudden progress in negotiations or some newfound ability to secure itself from Palestinian violence. Despite being grossly mismatched, Palestinians bearing light weapons were able to impose significant costs on Israel. As a result, Israel reconsidered its plan to evict the PLO and reoccupy Palestinian population centers.

Based on the preliminary evidence presented here, I conclude that weapons were used by the Palestinians not, or at least *not only*, for the purposes of spoiling or coup-proofing, as the prevailing accounts suggest, but as an insurance policy against the failure of the peace process. Because I have not presented definitive evidence, I offer this as a complimentary hypothesis to the prevailing explanations, its purpose is to expand the current scope of argumentation. The literature on conflict resolution has tended to take a rather dim view of the role of weapons on the prospects for peace,

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87. Interview by the author, April 3, 2012, Bethlehem.

suggesting they generate moral hazards<sup>88</sup> and make the reignition of conflict more likely.<sup>89</sup> While the Oslo process was hardly a success, this case nevertheless demonstrates the utility of weapons in helping to address the credible commitment problem. Nevertheless, weapons proliferation remains an ever-present concern. Illegal weapons production and smuggling have increased,<sup>90</sup> demilitarization has become an Israeli precondition for future peace talks with the Palestinians,<sup>91</sup> and the Palestinians increasingly insist on third party intervention.<sup>92</sup> Future research might see fit to explore the tension between these findings.




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88. Joanna Spear, “Disarmament and Demobilization,” in *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements*, eds. Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 153.

89. See Barry Ashton, “Making Peace Agreements Work: United Nations Experience in the Former Yugoslavia,” *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1997): pp. 776, 783; Mats R. Berdal, “Disarmament and Demobilisation after Civil Wars: Arms, Soldiers and the Termination of Armed Conflicts,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper No. 303 (1996); Chester A. Crocker and Fen Osler Hampson, “Making Peace Settlements Work,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 104 (Autumn 1996), p. 67; Spear, “Disarmament and Demobilization;” Monica Duffy Toft, *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 19–21.

90. Boutwell, “Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process,” p. 295; Strazzari and Tholens, “Another Nakba,” pp. 9, 11, 13; Gross, “Say Hello to ‘Carlo’;” Beaumont, “Homemade Guns Used,” Boutwell, “Wild West Bank,” p. 42; Boutwell, “Gusher of Illegal Weapons.”

91. Khaled Abu Toameh, “PA Rejects Demands for a Palestinian State,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 3, 2008, [www.jpost.com/Israel/PA-rejects-demands-for-a-demilitarized-Palestine](http://www.jpost.com/Israel/PA-rejects-demands-for-a-demilitarized-Palestine); Herb Keinon, “Netanyahu Wants Demilitarized PA State,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 14, 2009, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Netanyahu-wants-demilitarized-PA-state>.

92. A disproportionate number of the so-called *Palestine Papers*, internal PA documents leaked to Al Jazeera and published in January 2011, indicate a strong preference for third-party intervention. For examples, see N.A.; Minutes, PLO Negotiations Affairs Department “Minutes: Permanent Status Negotiations; Meeting, U.S. and Palestinian Teams,” June 26, 2000, <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/11.PDF>; PLO Negotiations Support Unit to Mohammad Dahlan, “Palestine Defence Needs,” October 4, 2000, <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/40.PDF>; “Immediate International Deployment” (March 30, 2006) <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/52.PDF>.