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**GDR Ministry for State Security, 'Information about  
The Escalation of Conflicts within the PLO'**

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**Summary:**

The report evaluates the internal situation of the PLO, which lost its bases in southern Lebanon and is exposed to increased pressure by Arab governments. The report describes the conflict between Arafat and the Syrian branch of the PLO and notes the increase in Syrian influence following a violent incident in Tripoli, in which Arafat and the Muslim Brothers were supposedly involved. Regardless of Syria's strength, the report states that Arafat has shown no inclination to work with the Syrian government. It concludes that a split seems likely, especially since Arafat has oriented himself towards the reactionary Arab forces.

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CC:

1. Ax [Hermann Axen]
2. Hoff [Heinz Hoffmann]
3. Fis [Oskar Fischer]
4. Sieb [Günter Siebert]
5. König [Gerd König]
6. AG [Working Group (Arbeitsgruppe)]
7. Archive

### **Information about The Escalation of Conflicts within the PLO**

In recent weeks the conflicts in the PLO between PLO Chairman Arafat and the Syrian leadership have witnessed a dangerous escalation. With the events in Tripoli in Northern Lebanon they have reached a qualitatively new level. The conflict within the PLO - and especially so within its largest subdivision, the Fatah - has its decisive causes in a forced process of differentiation of this politically and socially extremely heterogeneous movement. After the loss of its most important bases of operations in Southern Lebanon and in Beirut as a result of the Israeli Lebanon aggression, questions of strategy and tactics concerning the further struggle are facing the PLO with new intensity. The emergence of centrifugal tendencies is further facilitated by the organizational split [of the PLO] over 10 Arab states and the growing influences on the PLO by the various Arab regimes. After the war in Lebanon, the leaderships of some Arab states have come out as the allegedly true champions of Palestinian affairs. They are attempting to use the weakened PLO, or at least parts of the Palestinian Resistance Movement (PRM), for their own nationalist interests and hegemonic ambitions. This way the necessary political process of clarification within the PLO becomes more difficult and in part contorted in its contents. The external interference (in particular by Syria) and the close interconnectedness with other conflict areas (especially the Lebanon problem) have significantly accelerated the conflicts within the PLO. More openly than ever, the deep-seated political contradictions within the PRM become evident.

Relations with Syria have further gained in relevance for the PLO after the Lebanon war, and they are currently of central importance for the future fate of the PRM. Syria, which represents the main force of the anti-imperialist struggle in the region today, is pursuing a policy towards the PLO that is shaped to major extent by nationalist, "Greater Syria" ambitions. The current situation appears to be favorable to the Syrian leadership for further diminishing the independent decision-making capacity of the PLO and for subordinating the latter under its own objectives. Through all this, the Assad leadership is hoping for a further political upgrading of Syria in the Middle East. A PLO mostly independent in its decision-making is considered by the Syrian leadership as a hardly predictable irritant affecting its own nationalist Middle East concept, which does not, in the long run, exclude a compromise with the United States or Israel. A precondition for such a development, however, would be substantial concessions by the United States and Israel pertaining to Syrian interests, especially so regarding a return of the Golan and a guarantee of its influence in Lebanon. Currently though there does not exist any basis for this.

Leading members of the U.S. State Department are assessing internally that the Syrian efforts to gain complete control over the PLO are following the objective to present itself to the Soviet Union as the only reliable and effective partner in the Middle East. This way a "Palestinian option" for Soviet Middle East policy is also supposed to be excluded.

Leftist forces of the PRM are internally assessing that, currently, Syria feels itself

being strong enough to force through the replacement of Arafat as Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee and the Central Committee of the Fatah. Hafez al-Assad is preparing the convocation of a Fatah Congress via the oppositional Abu Saleh group and the convening of a meeting of the Palestinian National Council via Khalid Fahoum. Plans exist to form a new Fatah leadership, consisting of four representatives each from the Arafat wing and the oppositional group. In recent weeks there have been increasing efforts by the oppositional group to pull all institutions and forces of the Fatah in Syria and Lebanon on their side. Hereby it was able, by using direct force, to achieve some significant successes (among else, a joining by the Head of the Fatah Office in Damascus, Abu Amar Saads, the Director of Department IV of the Fatah, Abu Hatem, as well as by the Supreme Commander and Chief of the General Staff of the Palestinian Liberation Army, Brigadier General Tariq Muhammad al-Khadra). Those operations were undertaken in close coordination with the Assad leadership and the Syrian intelligence forces.

Arafat on the other side attempted to expand his influence in Northern Lebanon and to establish for himself a secure basis for the further struggle against Syria and his opponents in the PLO. Confidential information from leftist PLO circles and the Syrian intelligence forces unanimously indicate that Arafat had undertaken efforts in the Northern Lebanese city of Tripoli to build an anti-Syrian alliance with the Muslim Brothers, Sunni rightist forces, and pro-Iraqi circles. By exploiting the social and confessional contradictions in Northern Lebanon, those forces have recently increased their attacks against representatives of the Lebanese National Salvation Front, which functions as an ally of Syria. These operations are directed against the Lebanese Nasserites (Al-Murabitoun), the supporters of former Prime Minister Rashid Karame, and especially against the leftist forces led by the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). A temporary peak in this development occurred with the events between 11 and 13 October this year. During this period, the Islamic Unification Movement (IUM) caused a massacre in Tripoli among cadres of the LCP. The IUM is an association of Sunni Muslims in Northern Lebanon established in 1973. It is of explicit religious-fanatical, anti-communist, and anti-Syrian character. Currently the core of the IUM are the Muslim Brothers. The PLO division of Fatah led by Arafat is providing financial and military support to the IUM. According to internal information, members of the IUM are listed on the payrolls of the PLO since the mid-Seventies. Fatah cadres loyal to Arafat are in permanent contact with the IUM. Leftist circles of the PLO, however, also indicate that the IUM is penetrated by agents of the Lebanese and Syrian intelligence forces. Leftist PLO leading cadres and LCP officials agree in their assessment that Arafat is at least indirectly responsible for the events in Tripoli. In spite of urgent demands, Arafat did not undertake immediate energetic action to stop the massacre. The armed Lebanese leftist forces had to withdraw from Tripoli to the Syrian positions surrounding the city. After the ceasefire on the evening of 13 October this year, the Fatah units took over positions in several city districts of Tripoli. During this process they rejected the participation of forces from the two PLO leftist factions Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). According to DFLP assessments, Arafat has now achieved an important subgoal by jointly controlling with the IUM considerable parts of Tripoli. Syrian troops, forces of the Fatah opposition, and pro-Syrian PLO units have encircled the Arafat-loyal forces in Tripoli and stand ready for a counter-strike. A final decision in this regard has not been made yet. However, for Hafez al-Assad the conditions to strip Arafat of political power have further improved. Furthermore, political circles in Lebanon are pointing out that the Syrian leadership can exploit the events in Tripoli for a "disciplining" of the Lebanese Salvation Front, with whom Syria had increasing problems recently. Accounts to the contrary by Fatah functionaries, according to which the events in Tripoli had been allegedly provoked by Syria, cannot be confirmed so far.

Arafat's position has been weakened to a significant extent by the recent developments. Nonetheless, there are no indications whatsoever for a real willingness of Arafat to pursue a more realistic policy and a rapprochement with Syria as well as with his opponents within the Fatah/PLO. To the contrary, there exists the danger that he will - in the interest of a certain political counter-balance - lean even more to the bourgeois, pro-Western wing in the PLO leadership and the conservative Arab regimes. Despite certain criticism and reservations regarding the leadership style and

the policy of Arafat, prominent Fatah officials like Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) and Farouk Kaddoumi (Abu al-Lutf) continue to support the PLO Chairman. In their opinion, any potential alternative to Arafat will only make the situation for the PNM even worse. In case of an overthrow of Arafat they expect a complete break-up of the PLO. Abu Iyad, and circles close to him, are attempting to portray towards contact partners from socialist states the events in Tripoli as part of a Syrian plan to destroy the PLO.

The PFLP and DFLP have followed the expansion of conflicts within the Fatah/PLO with great concern. By means of a secret working paper, which went to all conflict parties for discussion, they have undertaken the attempt to introduce - while maintaining the current structures - a turn towards more democracy and a political process of clarification within the PLO. After the events in Tripoli PFLP and DFLP published on 16 October this year a statement in Damascus where for the first time Arafat was directly attacked, albeit without mentioning him by name. In hindsight DFLP leading circles around Nayef Hawatmeh voiced certain concerns. Though they stand in agreement with the content of the statement, they also want to preserve Arafat as an integrative figure to still prevent a final break-up of the PLO. On 15 October this year a secret message had been sent to the PLO Chairman as a result of talks by the General Secretary of the Yemeni Socialist Party, Ali Nasir Muhammad, with the General Secretaries of the DFLP, PFLP, LCP, and the Communist Action Organization in Lebanon (CAOL). [The message] is marked by the intention to have Arafat refrain from further actions with Muslim extremists and to induce him to depart from Tripoli in order to create opportunities for consultations with other PLO leaders.

Confidentially it has become known from Fatah circles that there will be a Central Committee meeting of Fatah in Tunis in the week between 24 and 30 October, where it is planned to expel the oppositional group of Abu Saleh and Abu Moussa from Fatah. This way an organizational separation would formally occur and the task of a "new formation" of Fatah can be addressed.

PRM leading cadres of Marxist-Leninist orientation are of the opinion that objective and subjective contradictions and polarization within Fatah have already reached such a level that a solution by maintaining the unity of Fatah will hardly be possible. This is why one now has to search for ways how the unity of the PLO can be preserved despite the split-up of its most important subdivision. To achieve this, all organizations that are part of the PLO have to agree on acceptable, general principles of future work. NATO circles are also calculating with the possibility of a split-up of Fatah and, as a result, also the PLO. They associate with this, on the one hand, that Arafat will free itself from "leftist ballast" and can turn more clearly towards the "moderate" forces in the Arab camp. On the other hand, they see the danger of a "radicalization" of the PRM. In their opinion, Arafat's opponents resonate especially among the young Palestinians in the refugee camps. Those are disappointed by the course of the PLO Chairman and its lack of success in resolving the Palestine question.

Palestinian and Lebanese leftist forces are internally assessing that Arafat's current course will have negative consequences for the PRM in the long run, also for the positions of the progressive parties resp. organizations in Lebanon, as well as for the fighting capacities of the anti-imperialist forces in the region. This is creating a difficult situation for the Palestinian and Lebanese leftist forces. Tensions between Arafat and Syria are further aggravated in a dangerous way. At the same time, the events in Tripoli have had a favorable effect on the strengthening of positions and organizational cohesiveness of the Fatah oppositional group.

This information must not be used publicly in the interest of maintaining confidentiality of the sources.