

# Private-enterprise war

**Y**ou can't fight city hall," goes the old New York expression. There, it's true; in the Middle East, by contrast, almost anyone can fight city hall. All you need is a car bomb or a grenade.

The hijacking by Palestinians of the Italian cruise liner *Achille Lauro* alarmingly demonstrates just how much warfare in the Middle East has become a matter of private enterprise. This latest horror is a replay of the June hijacking of a TWA jet from Athens to Beirut. In that drama, Lebanese Shiites commandeered the aircraft and successfully traded its passengers for relatives and friends who were being held hostage by the Israelis.

Over the past two months, the Israeli Navy has seized — or hijacked — boats crossing from Lebanon to Cyprus. Forty Lebanese and Palestinians were taken into custody: They are now in Israeli prisons. The Israelis say they were potential terrorists; the Arabs claim they were innocent wayfarers. Whatever the case, these Israeli "seizures" received scant media attention.

On Sept. 25 two Palestinians and an Englishman murdered three Israeli yachters in Larnaca, Cyprus. These "yachters" may have been Israeli intelligence agents monitoring Palestinian nautical activities at Larnaca.

In spite of Israeli claims that the attackers were members of the Palestine Liberation Organization, it is quite probable that they were not. More likely, these terrorists were members of one of myriad tiny extremist groups that oppose efforts by the PLO to enter into peace talks with Israel.

These "freelance" terrorists played into the hands of elements within the Israeli coalition government and military who are bitterly opposed to any peace negotiations with the Arabs, in general, and the PLO in particular. Blaming the PLO for the Larnaca murders, Israel mounted a dazzling bombing raid against PLO headquarters in Tunis.

## Arafat was target

The Israeli attack, probably guided by U.S. satellite photos, was aimed at killing PLO chief Yasser Arafat. As in at least 10 previous occasions, Arafat escaped Israeli assassination; in the process, some 70 Palestinians and Tunisians were killed by Israeli bombs.

The extremely delicate peace talks now under way between Israel, the Jordanians and PLO, seemed on the verge of extinction. Moderate Arabs could not help but notice that the Israeli attack came just when Jordan's King Hussein was in Washington to discuss the peace effort.

So, the spiral of violence continues unabated. Within the Israeli occupied West Bank, a novel phenomenon is occurring. Palestinians are beginning to kill Israeli settlers. In the past, the PLO did most of the fighting. Today, it is not the PLO at all, but young Palestinians who have grown up under harsh Israeli military occupation.

Unable to suppress mounting opposition to its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Israel has chosen to strike at the most convenient target, the

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PLO. But such attacks cause outrage among Arabs of all nationalities: Witness last week's killing of seven Israeli tourists in Egypt by a soldier. More deadly personal initiative.

Radical Palestinian groups, scorning PLO chief Arafat as a "traitor," are doing their best to sabotage any peace talks. This is what the Larnaca attack and the *Achille Lauro* were about. The Israeli military then followed up by trying again to kill Arafat. Both radical Palestinians, Syrians, Libyans and the Israelis want to see Arafat dead — the Middle East makes strange bedfellows.

These doleful events clearly demonstrate just how vulnerable are attempts to get some sort of Middle Eastern peace process under way. It takes months of patient work just to begin negotiations.

Then, one man with a bomb or burp gun can wreck the entire process. One terrorist attack will provoke an Israeli air raid. One killing on the West Bank — whether by Jewish settlers or Palestinians — causes the cycle of reprisal and counter-reprisal to resume with ever-increasing bloodshed.

## Willingness to fight

**A**fter almost 40 years of incessant fighting, the struggle between Israel, its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians has assumed a new and frightening degree of ferocity. It looks like Belfast on the Mediterranean — a savage, almost mindless sectarian violence. The difference is that Palestinians in the occupied territories are beginning to show a willingness to fight — and die — that they never have shown in the past.

Thank Lebanon for that. When the Israeli Army was literally run out of the madhouse of Lebanon by kamikaze car bombers and snipers, the lesson was not lost on Palestinians under Israeli military rule. Arab armies might never be able to face Israel on the battlefield, but man to man the Arabs could hold their own.

Ironically, Israel having crushed what minor military power the PLO once possessed, is now experiencing more attacks and more deaths than ever before. Instead of blasting Arab opposition to smithereens, Israel seems to have sown dragon's teeth. New enemies pop up daily, watered by the blood of their predecessors.

Terrorism — private-enterprise warfare, made-for-TV fighting — has been shown to work. In the case of the *Achille Lauro*, life is imitating Hollywood: The Italian liner has become a terrible sort of Death Boat, filled with fantasies of violence.

These acts of terror will not cease. The perpetrators — Arab and Israeli alike — have been bombing, napalming, stabbing and shooting one another for 40 years. Four decades of mayhem have made war between Arabs and Israelis a personal affair.