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The American Reinvention of a Palestinian Terrorist Organization: When Terrorist Networks Learn to Fight Without Bombs

Published: July 23, 2026 | Last Updated: July 23, 2026

For many Americans, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine belongs to another era of terrorism. The Marxist Palestinian organization became internationally notorious for airline hijackings and bombings in the 1960s and 1970s, but gradually disappeared from Western public consciousness as attention shifted towards al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas and other Islamist organizations.

A new report from the George Washington University Program on Extremism^[1] suggests that disappearance was dangerously misleading. The PFLP, designated by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since 1997, did not simply fade away. Researchers argue that its international support infrastructure adapted, shifting emphasis away from spectacular terrorist attacks towards influence operations, prisoner campaigns, fundraising, campus activism and alliances with other radical movements inside Western societies.

The implications should concern Americans regardless of their position on Israel. This is not simply another argument about campus protests or Middle Eastern politics. The report raises a much larger national-security question: what happens when the networks, symbols and narratives associated with a designated terrorist organization are repackaged inside American civil society until their origins become almost invisible?

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Key Takeaways

- GWU researchers^[2] argue that the PFLP has adapted rather than disappeared, developing a support and influence infrastructure reaching into the United States.
- The network examined centres heavily on Samidoun, which the U.S. Treasury designated^[3] in 2024 as a PFLP fundraising front.
- Researchers trace recurring interaction among Samidoun^[4] and American activist networks through protests, prisoner campaigns, campus activism and fundraising.
- Historical PFLP figures involved in terrorism have been repackaged^[5] within activist spaces as political and cultural icons.





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- A 2024 Columbia-linked online event featured Samidoun figures praising ^[6] Hamas, Islamic Jihad (<https://cognitura.org/blog/why-the-northern-ireland-model-does-not-apply-to-disarming-hamas-and-islamic-jihad>), and the PFLP and celebrating October 7 (<https://cognitura.org/blog/al-shifa-hospital-and-the-hostages-of-october-7-what-the-evidence-shows>), as "resistance."
- The danger to America is not limited to direct terrorism. Foreign extremist organizations can seek legitimacy, recruits, money and political influence inside democratic societies.

The Threat Did Not Disappear. It Changed Form.

The central argument of the GWU research ^[2] is important precisely because it challenges the way Americans traditionally think about terrorist organizations.

After 9/11, American counterterrorism understandably concentrated heavily on organizations capable of carrying out mass-casualty attacks. According to the researchers, that helped create a blind spot around the PFLP's propaganda and external support infrastructure. By the mid-2010s, they argue, elements of that infrastructure were able to operate on American soil with comparatively little attention.

The change was strategic. Instead of being associated primarily with hijackings and bombs, PFLP-linked activism could appear through prisoner campaigns, conferences, campus events, protest coalitions and fundraising networks.

That is potentially more difficult for an open society to confront because much of the activity takes place inside entirely legitimate democratic spaces. The issue is not protest itself, which is constitutionally protected, but whether designated terrorist organizations and their support infrastructures can exploit those spaces to normalise their ideology, raise resources or cultivate new constituencies.

Samidoun Demonstrates How the Model Works

Samidoun is central to the report.

For years it presented itself as the Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network. In October 2024, however, the U.S. Treasury described it as a "sham charity" ^[3] serving as an international fundraiser for the PFLP and sanctioned it as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Treasury simultaneously targeted Khaled Barakat, identifying him as part of the PFLP's leadership abroad and citing his involvement in fundraising and recruitment.

The enforcement has continued. The United States subsequently designated Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association for allegedly acting on behalf of the PFLP, and in May 2026 sanctioned two figures it identified as leaders of Samidoun's European operations.

The broader lesson is that terminology can obscure organizational reality. A group described as promoting prisoner solidarity may simultaneously serve functions that American authorities consider part of a terrorist organization's external infrastructure.

Turning Terrorists Into Activist Icons

Perhaps the most revealing element ^[5] of the GWU research concerns the rehabilitation of historical PFLP figures within American activist culture.

The report examines how figures including Leila Khaled, Ahmad Sa'adat, Ghassan Kanafani and Rasmea Odeh have been presented through the language of resistance, political imprisonment, feminism and liberation while



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their associations with the PFLP or histories of violence receive considerably less emphasis.

Odeh provides a particularly stark example. She was convicted in Israel over PFLP bombings in Jerusalem, including the 1969 supermarket bombing that killed two people. After later entering the United States without disclosing her convictions, she eventually admitted in federal court that she had made false statements on her immigration documents and was deported. Yet American activist organizations subsequently promoted her as a movement elder and "community icon," while she appeared in activist and campus settings.

This matters because movements are shaped by the heroes they choose.

When individuals associated with terrorism are transformed into symbols of liberation without their histories being fully explained, the boundary between political advocacy and legitimisation of political violence begins to erode.

From Campus Activism to a Wider Network

The report does not claim that mainstream American pro-Palestinian organizations are secretly controlled by the PFLP. That distinction is essential.

What it documents instead is a recurring ecosystem^[4] in which organizations including the Palestinian Youth Movement, U.S. Palestinian Community Network, Students for Justice in Palestine, Within Our Lifetime and others have appeared in campaigns, demonstrations or prisoner-support initiatives alongside Samidoun or its associated figures. The researchers describe common activity involving anti-Western themes, conferences, protests, campus organising and fundraising.

According to the report, the Palestinian Youth Movement co-sponsored at least 450 anti-Israel rallies after October 7 and has previously co-hosted prisoner campaigns with Samidoun. The U.S. Palestinian Community Network, meanwhile, described the Hamas-led October 7 attack as "self-defense operations" by the Palestinian "Resistance" and later strongly supported the campus encampment movement.

The concern is therefore not simply what happens inside one student organization. It is how ideas, personnel and narratives can move between campus activism, community organizations and transnational networks.

"Resistance 101" Should Have Been a Warning

One episode examined by the researchers demonstrates where this ideological convergence can lead.

During the March 2024 "Resistance 101" virtual event^[7] associated with Columbia University, Samidoun figures Khaled Barakat and Charlotte Kates reportedly praised the October 7 attacks as resistance. Barakat spoke approvingly of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the PFLP and encouraged support for "resistance movements."

That goes considerably further than criticism of Israeli policy or advocacy for Palestinian statehood.

When representatives associated with a U.S.-designated terrorist support network can enter the orbit of an American university and openly glorify organizations engaged in terrorism, the question ceases to be exclusively about Israel.

It becomes an American problem.



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Why America Should Care

The greatest mistake would be to assume that organizations hostile to Israel are therefore irrelevant to American security.

The GWU researchers describe a support ecosystem driven partly by explicitly anti-Western and anti-imperialist narratives. The PFLP itself is not merely an adversary of Israel; it is an organization^[8] that has historically attacked Western targets and remains formally designated as a terrorist organization by the United States.

Moreover, the distinction between Palestinian terrorist factions themselves is often less substantial operationally than outsiders imagine. The report points to the Gaza-based Joint Operations Room, through which Hamas, the PFLP, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other factions have coordinated communications, intelligence, logistics, weapons and training. The authors explicitly do **not** claim that American activist organizations are directed by that military structure, but they argue that the ideological convergence visible in U.S. support networks deserves serious attention.

Israel may frequently be the first target of these movements, but their worldview does not necessarily end at Israel's borders.

Protecting Free Speech While Recognising a Threat

None of this requires restricting legitimate criticism of Israel or peaceful advocacy for Palestinians.

America's commitment to free expression is one of its defining strengths. People must remain free to protest American or Israeli policies, campaign for Palestinian rights and express even deeply unpopular political opinions.

But free speech does not require blindness.

Law enforcement, universities, financial institutions and policymakers should be capable of distinguishing ordinary political activism from networks that raise funds for, recruit on behalf of, or provide material support to designated terrorist organizations. They should also be willing to examine how extremist movements attempt to gain legitimacy through apparently conventional activist structures.

That is precisely why the GWU report matters.

Conclusion

The PFLP's history offers an important warning about the adaptability of terrorist organizations.

The organization that became infamous for hijacking aircraft in the 1970s does not need to reproduce precisely the same tactics in 2026 to remain dangerous. According to the GWU researchers, its wider infrastructure has learned to operate through propaganda, prisoner campaigns, fundraising and activist alliances, embedding its narratives within movements whose participants may know little about their origins.

The United States has already recognised part of this threat by sanctioning Samidoun and individuals associated with its international operations. The next challenge is recognising the broader environment in which terrorist organizations can seek legitimacy and influence.

For America, the lesson should be familiar from decades of counterterrorism: a terrorist organization does not become harmless simply because it exchanges the bomb for the banner, the training camp for the campus, or the clandestine fundraiser for the online donation page.



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Sometimes the most dangerous stage is the one in which extremism becomes sufficiently familiar that society stops recognising where it came from.

Footnotes

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2. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/forgotten-threat> (<https://extremism.gwu.edu/forgotten-threat>) 1
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