

The PLO in Inter-Arab Politics

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The relationship of the Palestinians to the multi-faceted Arab-Israeli conflict is at the same time the most intimate, the most tragic, and the most complex. While the other entities involved in the controversy seek to achieve a variety of political and economic goals from the vantage point of established sovereignty, the Palestinians have been thrust by circumstance into the role of a victimized people struggling to re-establish their right to self-determination in the land where they once comprised the overwhelming majority. For them, what is at stake is their very existence as a collective identity.

As the designated representative of this dispossessed populace, the PLO is charged with the difficult task of protecting the interests of the Palestinians in the intricate power game that has come to surround the conflict. The international actors it has to deal with in this context represent a variety of other interests, most of which are either in conflict with or unrelated to those of the Palestinians. These concerned parties include the Israelis and their supporters in world Jewry, the superpowers, the European Community, the non-aligned bloc, and the Arab states.

The Israelis, of course, are the principal adversaries of the Palestinians. The Zionist movement which spawned modern Israel was exclusively

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dedicated to the transformation of Arab Palestine into a Jewish state. It ultimately accomplished this aim by promoting the immigration of European Jews, and through an astute diplomacy designed to win the support of Great Britain first and then of the United States by convincing these powers that a Jewish national entity in Palestine would be to their advantage. The establishment of Israeli sovereignty involved the expulsion of a large portion of the Arab population, and those who remained became second-class citizens with few political rights.

Following 1948, the Israelis sought to obliterate all traces of Palestinian identity, even to the point of denying that such an identity ever existed. Then the rest of Palestine was conquered in 1967, and though much of the indigenous population remained intact in this case, a deliberate policy of establishing Jewish settlements was adopted to make its situation untenable. Underlying all of these actions was an attempt to dehumanize the Palestinians and divest them of political status.

The relationship of the superpowers to the Palestinians is more ambiguous. Theoretically, the Soviet Union is the defender of oppressed peoples from "imperialist" exploitation, and the United States is the champion of liberty and self-determination. In reality, however, both countries are primarily concerned with maintaining their spheres of influence in the global confrontation between them. But, while the United States sees its relationship with Israel as a strategic asset of such importance that it is willing to risk a rupture with the oil-producing states by refusing to acknowledge any moral content in the Palestinian issue or to have dealings with the PLO, the Soviet Union has consistently supported the Palestinian cause without denying Israel's right to exist. Moscow recently drew closer to the PLO by granting it official recognition, a step which the United States will ultimately have to take if it wants a durable peace.

The European Community is sensitive to the plight of the Palestinians, but has never been able to mount an effective peace initiative of its own because of a disinclination to adopt policies markedly at variance with those of the United States. The western Europeans would like to develop close relations with the Arab world in view of common security interests, reciprocal marketing advantages, and their dependence on Middle East oil. But though a Euro-Arab dialogue came into existence in 1974, the European side has yet to extend full recognition to the PLO, or to adopt punitive measures against Israel for its practices in the occupied territories. The first priority is always the Atlantic alliance.

The non-aligned bloc is openly supportive of the Palestinian cause. But it has been unable to do more than pass resolutions favouring self-determination and condemning Israel. The bloc is simply too large and varied to do more than this, and its leverage in international politics is limited.

Because the PLO has not been able to enlist adequate backing from any of these quarters, it depends largely on the Arab states for the assistance it needs to remain viable. But its relationship with the other Arab entities, our principal concern here, is both complex and enigmatic.

The most important difference between the Palestinians and the other Arabic-speaking societies is that, while the latter were completing their liberation from various forms of Western control, a reverse process was taking place in Palestine. Zionism began and developed as a movement among Jewish Europeans, and in this respect it is "Western." But, whereas imperialism started to recede after the First World War, the Zionists were just beginning to move into the Middle East.

By 1970, the independence movement which had started with the Great Arab Revolt in 1916 came to a conclusion. But in Palestine, the Israelis were engaged in the final phase of their conquest of the country by establishing Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. That the ultimate aim of this practice is an Israeli take-over has now become clear. According to one recent report based on first-hand observation, the West Bank Arabs are not allowed to drill for water deeper than 100 metres, while Jewish settlers in the same areas are free to drill as far as 300 metres, thus lowering the water-table enough to dry up the Arab wells.¹ This is just one example of the general thrust of Israel's policies in the occupied territories.

The fact that the British Mandate artificially segregated Palestine from the rest of Greater Syria under a special administrative commitment to the establishment in Palestine of a "national home for the Jewish people" was a major disadvantage to the Palestinians. The Mandate set up a Jewish Agency under Zionist control to ensure the realization of this commitment. But the net effect of the arrangement was to provide the Zionist settlers with a self-governing apparatus, whereas no similar institution was established for the Arab majority. During the inter-war period and after, the Jewish community in Palestine and the emerging Arab states were involved in a nation-building process which included the development of political doctrines, parties, and administrative techniques. This was almost completely absent among the Palestinians, who were unable to go beyond the tenuous and uninspired leadership of prominent families which were in rivalry with each other and ideologically inept.

The stunted political growth of the Palestinians made them totally unfit to meet the challenge of the galvanized and well-organized Zionist movement in the immediate post-World War II period. During the course of 1948 they

¹ Report by E.F. Henderson, Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU), London, May 14, 1981.

became a minority in their own country, as the British Mandate gave way to the State of Israel. The trauma of this experience left the Palestinians so stunned that they were incapacitated for two decades. Dispersed and demoralized, they relied on the Arab states to solve their problem for them. But in the ensuing wars of 1956 and 1967, the Israelis demonstrated an overwhelming military superiority. It was at this point that a genuine Palestinian movement was formed.

Though the PLO was created by the Arab League at the Cairo Summit Conference in 1964, it was not until 1968 that it became a significant entity within the Arab system, following the successful encounter of Jordanian and Palestinian forces with Israeli troops at al-Karamah on March 21, 1968. The Palestine National Council met in Cairo in July 1968 and adopted a new National Charter, replacing the Charter of 1964. The basic doctrine embodied in this manifesto was that the responsibility for liberating Palestine rested with the Palestinian people themselves, who were thenceforth committed to armed struggle as the only means of achieving this end. The emphasis was on a "popular war of liberation" under the auspices of a Palestinian mass movement.² Aside from fostering a spirit of activism, the PLO came under new leadership at this time. Ahmad Shuqairy had resigned the chairmanship in December 1967, and Yasser Arafat emerged as a far more competent and dynamic head of the movement.

Though the PLO was transformed into a viable organization by these events, it was suddenly thrust into the complicated arena of inter-Arab politics. The Arab system, which came into existence with the founding of the Arab League in 1945, had itself gone through several stages of development. The initial period lasted until 1955, and was based on a rivalry between Egypt and the Hashemite states of Transjordan and Iraq over the questions of leadership and Fertile Crescent unity. Egypt, then allied with Saudi Arabia, was the ultimate victor in this encounter. A second phase, which continued up to the 1967 war, was centred on a somewhat contrived dispute between self-styled "revolutionary" states and the conservative regimes. When Abdul-Nasser and the Syrian Baathists, who were both committed to pan-Arabism and Arab socialism, formed the United Arab Republic (UAR) in early 1958, it appeared that the forces of radicalism had come into irreconcilable conflict with the defenders of the *status quo*.

But the revolutionary-conservative dichotomy never fully materialized. Abdul-Karim Qassim, who had overthrown the Iraqi monarchy in July 1958, took a strong position against joining the Egyptian-Syrian union and jailed many Nasserist sympathizers in the country. Similarly, the disturbances in

² See Articles 8, 9, and 10, Palestine National Charter.

Lebanon that summer turned out to be a response to a disequilibrium in the Lebanese system, rather than a struggle over the question of Arab unity. Then, in September 1961, the Syrians seceded from the UAR, leaving a residue of embitterment and mutual hostility.

Abdul-Nasser's Arab policies were always based on a combination of his commitment to certain ideals and a perceptive realism. One of the ways in which he dealt with Qassim's negative attitude towards the UAR was to improve his relations with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, both conservative monarchies. The Syrian Baathists were dismayed by this political manoeuvre,³ but nevertheless it did strengthen Abdul-Nasser's position within the Arab system. After the Syrian secession, he sought to emphasize his revolutionary image by actively supporting the new republican regime in Yemen. This policy led to intensive Egyptian military involvement, and a deterioration in relations with Saudi Arabia which was helping the ousted Yemeni royalists.

Despite Abdul-Nasser's anti-conservative intervention in Yemen, he was unable to achieve a *rapprochement* with the Baathist and Nasserite regimes which came to power in Iraq and Syria in February and March 1963. The "Cairo negotiations," which were conducted immediately following the *coups* in Damascus and Baghdad, brought the Syrians and Iraqis together with Abdul-Nasser to discuss the possibilities of federation.⁴ But the talks only demonstrated a pronounced difference in outlook between the Egyptian leader and the Fertile Crescent Baathists. This left the "revolutionaries" on bad terms with each other and further exacerbated the tensions that had developed in inter-Arab relations.

The 1967 war opened a third phase in the history of the Arab system. The dominant theme in this case was pragmatism. Israel's military superiority and its occupation of Sinai, Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights inclined a number of Arab leaders to explore the possibilities of a political settlement. Abdul-Nasser and King Hussein were able to induce the Khartoum Summit Conference, which met in late August 1967, to include a resolution which permitted the Arab states "to unify their efforts in political action at the international diplomatic level to eliminate the consequences of aggression and to ensure the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Arab territories occupied during the June war."⁵ The first step towards a resolution of the Yemen dispute was also taken at Khartoum, bringing

³ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 18-19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-76.

⁵ Fuad Jaber (ed.), *International Documents on Palestine, 1967* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1970), pp. 655-57.

Abdul-Nasser into a close relationship with both Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In order to emphasize his determination to preserve the independence of Egyptian foreign policy, he walked out of the Rabat Summit in December 1969 when the other Arab states hesitated to accept fully their responsibilities in the struggle against Israel.

Anwar Sadat, who had always been an Egyptian nationalist rather than a pan-Arab enthusiast, took Abdul-Nasser's place after his death in September 1970. The following November, Hafiz Assad, representing the moderate wing of the Baath, succeeded to power in Syria. These leaders in particular became the principal architects of the new pragmatism that had begun to emerge at the Khartoum Summit. Sadat perpetuated Abdul-Nasser's policy of working towards a political settlement, but adopted a more circumspect and less abrasive style. Assad, who was anxious to bring Syria out of the isolation engendered by the intransigence of his leftist predecessors, sought to promote good relations with all the Arab states, especially Egypt. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia was favourably impressed by these trends in Egyptian and Syrian policy and extended financial aid to both countries. The result was a tacit trilateral alliance based on an "equitable imbalance" of assets which made it the dominant bloc within the Arab system.⁶

This was the political framework within which the PLO had to operate in the late 1960's and the 1970's. The major problem lay in the interpretation of the "political settlement" concept. Though the Khartoum Summit had pledged to safeguard the right of the people of Palestine to their homeland and not to recognize Israel, it was clear that any negotiated arrangement under which Israel relinquished the occupied territories must necessarily involve at least *de facto* recognition of Israeli sovereignty as constituted before June 1967. The first priority of the confrontation states was to recover their lost territories, and the price they had to pay for a political settlement was a compromise on the right of the Palestinians to self-determination. In purely theoretical terms, then, there has been, and is, an underlying contradiction between the PLO and Arab state positions.

There are also important political and economic differences that separate the Palestinians from the other Arab societies. Most Arab regimes are committed to the territorial *status quo* in the Middle East because the power they enjoy is based on the established borders and the existing political structure. As Walid Kazzuha has put it, "State boundaries and national sovereignty became sacred elements in the life of the separate Arab entities," though they paid lip service to the idea of integration and unification.⁷ The

⁶ Fuad Ajami, "Stress in the Arab Triangle," *Foreign Policy* (Winter 1977-78), p. 91.

⁷ Walid Kazzuha, *Palestine in the Arab Dilemma* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), pp. 36-37.

PLO, by contrast, has no stake in the *status quo* and its primary aim is to alter the present territorial situation, at least to the extent of bringing into existence a "secular democratic state" in Palestine. It has also sought at various times to orient the policy of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in accordance with the specific demands of the Palestinian revolution.

Another source of tension between the PLO and the Arab states stems from differences in political style. The ruling élites in most Arab countries tend to monopolize power and to relate to their masses in a paternalistic way. The PLO, on the other hand, is more egalitarian in its approach. As Kazziha points out, the emphasis on popular armed resistance "does not only invite the open and active participation of the Arab masses, but also establishes under certain conditions a new basis of political legitimacy, one which is based on massive violence and revolutionary activity."⁸ In this respect, the Palestinian hierarchy has been able to establish a closer relationship with its own people than most Arab regimes, and the revolutionary orientation of the movement therefore implies an underlying threat to the existing governments.

In the economic sphere there is an equally marked divergence of Palestinian and Arab state interests. As a national entity, the Palestinians have virtually no economic assets since their homeland itself has been taken over by an alien people. Consequently, the PLO's first economic priority is the perpetuation of the Arab struggle against Israel. For many of the Arab countries, however, the conflict with Israel may have become obsolete from a financial point of view. Walid Kazziha takes the position that the Egyptian bourgeoisie of the 1970's no longer regarded the existence of the Jewish state as a threat to its economic interests and even looked to profitable ventures with Israeli businessmen in the future.⁹ The same class also saw no advantage in maintaining the close ties Abdul-Nasser had developed with the Soviet Union, and much preferred a cordial relationship with the United States. As the natural leader of this dominant group in Egypt, Sadat fostered the American connection and made peace with Israel. It should also be pointed out that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikhdoms attach great economic and political importance to remaining on good terms with the United States, despite their opposition to the Egyptian-Israeli treaty.

Though virtually all Arabs genuinely sympathize with the Palestinian cause, there are conflicting interests. This first became apparent in the Jordanian-Palestinian confrontation of September 1970, which led to the termination of the PLO's military operations in Jordan the following

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-97.

summer. The PLO subsequently concentrated on building up its position in Lebanon, though in principle the extent of guerrilla activities in that country was restricted by the Cairo Agreement of November 3, 1969.¹⁰ But between the eviction from Jordan and the October 1973 war, the Palestinian movement was without a clearly defined political direction or methodology. Its fragmentation into a host of moderate and radical factions deprived it of unified leadership, and the periodic resort to hijackings and other such activities was counterproductive in terms of public relations.

After the October war, the PLO's political influence within the Arab system was enhanced. Its first major triumph was the recognition by all of the Arab states at the Rabat Summit Conference in October 1974 that it was the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This helped to establish its status and to give it leverage in inter-Arab politics. Its primary disadvantage is that it cannot operate without the support of the Arab states, which give priority to their own interests over those of the Palestinians. Another problem lies in the occasional attempts of certain regimes to establish control over the movement.

During the years since the Rabat Summit, the PLO has gradually refined its tactical approach to the politics of the Arab system. Its most useful assets are the popularity of its cause in the Arab world and the fact that the established governments gain prestige and enhance their own legitimacy by backing the Palestinian movement. Through a combination of adept diplomatic manoeuvring and the adoption of flexible policies, the PLO has managed to maintain its viability. As Jonathan Randal has put it, "Arafat skilfully shifts with the changing winds of Arab politics, taking advantage of the differences among the various regimes to preserve the relatively autonomous position of the PLO."¹¹ What Arafat has been able to do is to keep the Arab governments slightly off balance as they seek to buttress their own respectability with regard to the Palestinian question in their competitive and often uncertain relationship with each other.

Arafat has also increased the bargaining power of the PLO by acting as mediator in some inter-Arab disputes and by adopting a pragmatic style in keeping with the prevailing trend in the Arab system. His decision to support the concept of a Palestinian mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza, which was endorsed in somewhat ambiguous terms by the Palestine National Council in

¹⁰ Walid Khadduri (ed.), *International Documents on Palestine, 1969* (Beirut: IPS and University of Kuwait, 1972), pp. 804-5.

¹¹ Jonathan Randal, "PLO's Armed Struggle Rhetoric Muted by Pragmatic Politicking," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1980.

March 1977,¹² put most of the Arab states at ease without abandoning the “secular democratic state” principle. The basis of the PLO’s realism is its recognition that it has to function on both an idealistic and a pragmatic level if it is to deal successfully with the Arab regimes. By accepting the diversity of interests that exist in the Arab world, the PLO has been able to maximize its limited assets and to assume a more powerful role in the Arab system than would otherwise have been possible. In this respect, it has mastered the art of give-and-take.

One of the attempts of Arab states to control the PLO was King Hussein’s proposal in March 1972 that a federated state comprised of Transjordan and the West Bank be established under his own crown. The PLO immediately rejected this plan and persuaded Egypt and other Arab countries to do the same. Finally, in October 1974, King Hussein accepted the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinians.

A dispute with Iraq developed in connection with the endorsement of the mini-state idea by Fateh, the DFLP, and Saiqa. The Baghdad government was strongly critical of this position and on October 12, 1974 joined with four radical Palestinian factions in forming the Rejection Front.¹³ Eventually the Iraqis seemed to have become involved in a terrorist campaign designed to force the PLO to abandon its moderate policies. But after Camp David, Iraq itself became more flexible as part of Saddam Hussein’s efforts to assume a position of leadership within the Arab system. This brought the feud with the PLO to an end, and later Baghdad severed its ties with its radical Palestinian allies.

The most complicated relationship the PLO has had in terms of the question of control has been with Syria. Damascus has always been the most ardent champion of the Palestinian cause and is the patron of the movement’s Baathist faction, Saiqa. Initially, President Assad’s concern was not to dominate the PLO, but to influence it and to circumscribe Palestinian operations on Syrian territory. With his intervention in Lebanon in 1976, however, the situation was substantially altered.

Assad first sought to resolve the Lebanese crisis by proposing a modification of the confessional system designed to establish an equilibrium between the Christian and Muslim sects. This was rejected by the Lebanese leftist-PLO coalition and when the fighting turned in its favour, Assad sent his troops into the country to support the right-wing Maronites and to

¹² US Dept. of Commerce, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Middle East and North Africa*, March 21, 1977, pp. A8-A9.

¹³ Jorgen Nielson (ed.), *International Documents on Palestine, 1974* (Beirut: IPS and University of Kuwait, 1977), pp. 512-13.

prevent a radical transformation of Lebanon's political structure. Syrian-PLO relations were severely damaged by this move, but were subsequently restored when Assad turned against the Maronite militia in the aftermath of the Arab League intervention of October 1976. During the ensuing years, the PLO secured its position with Syrian consent in a corridor extending from west Beirut to a point below Tyre. But the dominant role of Syria in Lebanon implicitly restricts its freedom of action.

The PLO has other problems in its relationship with the indigenous population of Lebanon. The guerrillas became closely allied with Kamal Junblatt's National Progressive Party after it was formed in the late 1960's and remained on that side throughout the civil war. They also had a good relationship with the Shi'ite community. But when the first phase of the fighting ended in October 1976, the Palestinians were entrenching themselves in their corridor extending to the South from Beirut. Ultimately, this gave many Lebanese the impression that the PLO was intent on establishing sovereignty in this region, a policy referred to as "implantation."¹⁴ The Shi'ites, who are largely from the South, set up a paramilitary organization known as *Amal* (Hope) to uphold the interests of the Shi'ites in Lebanon.¹⁵

The PLO cannot possibly operate as a national resistance movement without a territorial base near Israel. But it also has to take into account the interests of the indigenous population. In Jonathan Randal's view, the PLO's main problem in this respect is its habit of "alienating the few Arab societies in which Palestinians are allowed to move about freely. Most Lebanese feel that they destroyed one state [Lebanon] to make their own."¹⁶

In the aftermath of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the signing of the Camp David accords, the Arab system underwent a number of significant structural changes. In December 1977, Syria, Libya, the PLO, Algeria, and South Yemen formed the Arab Front for Steadfastness and Confrontation, which stood adamantly opposed to the unilateralism of Egyptian policy.¹⁷ Initially, the other Arab states either supported Sadat's peace initiative or remained silent. But after Camp David, most of them became increasingly alienated from Cairo.

It was in this context that Iraq began to assume a leadership role in inter-Arab politics. At the Baghdad conferences of November 1978 and

¹⁴ William Claiborne and Jonathan Randal, "Palestinians Struggle to Keep Last Redoubt," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1981.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jonathan Randal, "Obstacles Keep New Blood from PLO Leadership," *Washington Post*, March 3, 1980.

¹⁷ IPS Research and Documents Staff (eds.), *International Documents on Palestine, 1977* (Beirut: IPS and Kuwait University, 1979), p. 461.

March 1979, Saddam Hussein adopted a more moderate stance and became the principal coordinator of the Arab opposition to the Camp David accords and the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. Subsequently, he developed a close working relationship with King Hussein and the regime in Riyadh, laying the foundations of a tacit Iraqi-Saudi-Jordanian axis. These developments were favourable to the PLO in the sense that they were based on a rejection of Sadat's failure adequately to link the Palestinian issue to his political settlement with Israel. But they were also disadvantageous because they had the net effect of polarizing the Arab system.

In the autumn of 1978, Iraq and Syria began to seek a *rapprochement* with each other in order to meet the challenge posed by the course of Egyptian policy. By the following summer, however, their projected federation scheme had become a dead letter, and by 1980 they were once again at loggerheads. In September of that year, Assad and Qadhafi proclaimed a nominal merger of Syria and Libya,¹⁸ establishing what amounted to a counter-axis directed against the Iraqi-Saudi-Jordanian alliance.

The two aligned groups of Arab states came into confrontation over the Iraqi attack on Iran in September 1980 and the Amman Summit Conference the following November. On a visit to Riyadh in August, Saddam Hussein seems to have obtained Saudi support for the venture, and he later won the backing of Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, North Yemen, Tunisia, and Morocco.¹⁹ Syria and Libya, however, were strongly opposed to the Iraqi campaign and reportedly gave military assistance to Iran.²⁰

The friction generated by the controversy over the war gathered momentum in the autumn and led to another hostile encounter in connection with the Summit Conference that had been scheduled to convene in Amman in late November. Assad was concerned that Iraq would play a dominant role at the meeting, and his formerly good relations with Jordan had deteriorated seriously. He initially sought to engineer a postponement of the Conference, but when this failed he tried to persuade his partners in the Steadfastness Front to boycott the sessions. Arafat continued to press for a delay in the hope that the antagonism between the rival camps would subside, and he was supported by Algeria in this endeavour. But in the end, they succumbed to Assad's pressure and joined Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and South Yemen in boycotting the Conference.²¹

¹⁸ US Dept. of Commerce, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Middle East and North Africa*, September 10, 1980, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ *Washington Post*, September 25 and 30, 1980.

²⁰ *Washington Post*, October 8, 1980.

²¹ *Washington Post*, November 26, 1980.

The major problem now confronting the PLO is the alienation of Egypt and Syria from the Iraqi-Saudi-Jordanian axis and its affiliates. If this breach in the Arab system were to be mended, a powerful front in opposition to Israeli intransigence could be established. This kind of Arab solidarity would certainly weaken Israel's position in international politics and ultimately force it to consider the possibility of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Such an eventuality holds the prospect of a radical transformation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in all its dimensions. It would not only be the beginning of a genuine resolution of the Palestinian issue, but an advantage to the Arab states as well. They are, after all, also directly involved in the dispute, and it is highly questionable that they have more to gain from accommodating Israel than in seeing to it that an equitable settlement is achieved in Palestine. Just as all the Arabs are interdependent, there is a corresponding community of interests.