

ARGUMENT

Why Palestinians Need to Reclaim the PLO

The Palestinian Authority has failed to deliver democracy or sovereignty to the Palestinian people. It's time for a new generation of leaders to deliver accountable governance and freedom.

BY **MARWA FATAFTA, ALAA TARTIR** | AUGUST 20, 2020, 3:45 AM

The **COVID-19 pandemic** and the Israeli government's plans to further **annex** occupied Palestinian territories have shown the Palestinian leadership—once again—what it means to run a government without sovereignty. The recently announced deal between **Israel and the United Arab Emirates** is further evidence of the leadership's inability to influence events that shape the fate of the Palestinian people.

These recent developments underscore the failure of the Palestinian Authority (PA) **statehood project**, and with it the two-state solution paradigm. Israel's annexation plans—which are **still on the table**, according to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—would leave fragmented West Bank enclaves under nominal PA control, with ultimate control exercised by Israel, as has been the case since the occupation began in 1967.

Similarly, Hamas would rule the Gaza Strip within the narrow confines of the Israeli siege imposed in 2007 and supported by Egypt. These outcomes are neither what the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership envisaged when it signed the **Oslo Accords** with Israel beginning in 1993, nor what the international community intended to sponsor when it agreed to support peace efforts in the region.

The PA, initially established as an interim government, has from the start been unable to defend its territory and population against the expansionist Israeli colonial project, or to manage an economically viable entity that could ensure a dignified livelihood for the Palestinians, especially at times of acute crisis.

The Palestinian economy is still dependent on foreign aid as well as on the Israeli economy and the detrimental arrangements put in place under the Oslo Accords. These include the **1994 Protocol on Economic Relations**, which formalized Palestinian-Israeli economic relations within a skewed customs union that favors Israel's stronger economy and left Palestinians limited space to develop economic independence and self-reliance.

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The much-touted good-governance approach the PA adopted over the past few decades has resulted, ironically, in the **growth of authoritarian trends and structures of repression** rather than a process of democratization and accountability. The political schism between Fatah and Hamas that dates back to 2007 meant that the Fatah-led PA focused its power over the West Bank, while international donors invested heavily in strengthening the PA's security establishment. Today, the Palestinians' governance structures are weak and undemocratic at all levels.

The Palestinian resistance factions which took over the PLO in the late 1960s had **succeeded in uniting** the dispersed Palestinian communities in refugee camps and the diaspora with the collective aim of liberating Palestine. The PLO housed many Palestinian political factions, including Fatah (its largest member), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, among many others. It also included unions of workers, writers, students, and women, among others, though it excluded Islamist groups.

The creation of the PA gutted the PLO politically as decision-making power shifted to the PA. Meanwhile, the **influx of foreign aid** ensured the PA's place as the de facto Palestinian representative in relations with Israel and in the so-called peace process.

Yet, despite its weakness, the PA has **managed to dominate** the PLO and to diminish the latter's role as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, as recognized by the United Nations and the Arab League in 1974, and as the spearhead of the Palestinian national liberation movement. That must change—and the first step is to shift the center of gravity back to the PLO.

The PA's lack of sovereignty has meant total dependence on the financial and political will of the international community for survival, and consequently the loss of independent political decision-making. Indeed, the international community's decision to suspend PA funding after Hamas won legislative elections in 2006 is a clear example of how the PA is unable to protect Palestinians' democratic choices—even if they come through free and fair elections. What keeps the PA from disbanding is the international backing it receives: If the PA collapses, so would its security coordination with Israel, which is an outcome that the international community prefers to avoid.

But after nearly three decades of existence, the PA has not brought the Palestinian people any closer to realizing their inalienable right to self-determination. It is past time to declare the PA and its structures obsolete: It is simply unfit for present and future Palestinian generations that seek equality, justice, and freedom above all.

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Palestinians are faced, once more, with the challenging task of **reimagining their future** and charting their trajectory toward justice and freedom. The fundamental rethinking of the existing, dominant framework means questioning the institutional utility of the PA and its role in the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Palestinians might be better served in reviving, reforming, and reclaiming a potentially more representative and inclusive institution: the PLO.

Over the past year, a dozen Palestinian policy analysts at Al-Shabaka have sought to tackle the thorny questions to which the Palestinian people, especially the youth, demand answers. These questions included: How can the PLO maintain accountability as both a national liberation movement and governing body? How might Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement be integrated in the PLO's structures after decades of exclusion? And what models of Palestinian youth leadership can be further developed for the coming era? The key messages of the report "Reclaiming the PLO, Engaging the Youth"—**available here**—are that inclusiveness, accountability, and youth leadership matter.

Reconstituting the PLO would mean bringing Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement into the fold. A PLO without these two major factions undermines its claims to be representative of all Palestinians and erodes its legitimacy. Token representation is not enough: Their inclusion needs to be part and parcel of a

national dialogue that rethinks the Palestinian political program and, importantly, revisits its **leadership models** and **styles of governance**.

Israel has often exploited the actions of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement to evade its commitments under the Oslo peace agreements and to justify its violence against the Palestinian people. However, Israel has itself several times **reached agreements** with Hamas—which **Hamas has upheld**—and which it has ensured other factions within Gaza have upheld. Moreover, Israel's military occupation and expansion of illegal settlements, despite Fatah's control of the West Bank, dispel the myth that Hamas is the main obstacle to peace.

Reconstituting the PLO will require meaningful consensus-building, which is crucial for a national liberation movement. As it is not a government, it needs to achieve accountability to the people it represents through consulting them and coming to a consensus rather than through elections.

Accountability also matters as a way out of the current morass. Not only have the Palestinians' current political leaders in the PLO and the PA evolved into a self-serving elite largely disconnected from those they claim to represent, but so has, to a large extent, Hamas in Gaza since 2007.

The gap is stark: Few Palestinians—whether they live in the occupied Palestinian territories or in the diaspora—have had a say in any of the political decisions taken on their behalf. While **opinion polls** show, year after year, that the majority of Palestinians in the occupied territories are frustrated with the Palestinian leadership, the PA, and the Palestinian political factions, Palestinians have no political mechanism to change their leaders, let alone rebuild their political system.

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As such, there can be no serious discussion about reforming Palestinian leadership without Palestinian people everywhere having a say in the decision-making process, in correcting course, and in holding their political leaders to account. A reformed PLO must answer to the **Palestinian people** first and foremost.

Bringing in **the new generation of Palestinian leaders** is imperative. However, the Palestinian political playing field is currently dotted with structural obstacles to the emergence of young Palestinian leaders committed to the Palestinian struggle for justice and freedom. From international **donors' obsession** with cultivating Palestinian technocrats, who are divorced from the lived realities of Palestinians under occupation and in the diaspora, to the protection of the ruling elites and the violent suppression of voices that could challenge the status quo, young Palestinian leaders are undermined at every turn.

Palestinians can draw lessons from their own history for models of leadership, including the beginnings of the PLO itself, where Palestinians formed collective leadership based on consensus and succeeded in the mass mobilization and participation of Palestinians at the grassroots level.

While the current PA leadership rightly rejected **U.S. President Donald Trump's** peace plan, they continue to cling to a political program that has failed the Palestinian people, continuing to place their hopes in actors, such as the United States and the European Union, who have demonstrated for decades that they do not have the political will to deliver on Palestinian rights. It is impossible amid this chaos to build a new, representative Palestinian body with an effective political program.

Regardless of the PLO's current semidormant status, it is still the body closest to Palestinian communities at home and in the diaspora. The only way out of the current political dead end is for Palestinians to revive and build their grassroots networks at home, in refugee camps, and in the diaspora from the ground up.

A new generation of Palestinian leaders must reclaim the PLO as the one roof under which the Palestinian people can convene, organize, elect their representatives, recreate a unified national narrative, and debate and decide on a political program that will best realize the Palestinian people's rights to self-determination, freedom, and justice.

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