COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Palestinians and their Leadership: Restoring the PLO

By: Marwa Fatafta · December, 2020

This commentary is an excerpt from a larger report, "Reclaiming the PLO, Re-engaging Youth," published in August 2020. Please refer to the report's introduction for more information about its contents and contributors, and to the literature review for more sources about Palestinian leadership.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause great personal hardship, loss of human life, and financial chaos across the globe, and as Israel remains on the brink of de jure annexation of parts of the West Bank, the Palestinian people must transform crisis into opportunity. Rather than wait for Israel to slowly strangle the Palestinian Authority (PA) that was established as an interim governing body during the Oslo Accords, it is past time to separate the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from the PA and to work to restore the PLO's mandate, representativeness, and accountability to the people it claims to represent.

Can we envisage a representative and accountable leadership that enables Palestinians to contribute to the political decisions that shape their lives, that provides them avenues for action, and that serves as an arena for Palestinian political engagement and participation? Perhaps by reviewing some of the challenges of the past we can envision an alternative future in which a representative and accountable PLO is the linchpin of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and self-determination.

The Myth of Representation

The principal mission of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people is to represent all Palestinians across fragmented geographies and ideological lines. In its early years, the PLO spearheaded the national liberation movement and succeeded in bringing Palestinian resistance factions under one umbrella following the defeat of 1967. It also created community structures and associations in refugee camps, Palestinian diaspora community organizations, and major development institutions.

This approach kept the PLO going from the 1960s to the 1980s, with several notable successes along the way, including reaffirming the Palestinians as a globally recognized people, with the PLO as their sole legitimate representative. Yet liberation and self-determination have not been achieved, and there has not been accountability for that failure either under the leadership of the late Yasser Arafat or that of Mahmoud Abbas. Rather, even now, the discussion of the current leadership crisis remains hostage to personalities. The frequently asked question is: what happens after Mahmoud Abbas? This not only reflects the personalized nature of the Palestinian leadership, but also dismisses the Palestinian polity from the equation.

Since the 1990s, the relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian people has fluctuated between mass engagement and disconnect, yet there has never been as wide a gap between the Palestinian polity and the leadership as there is today.

The original purpose of mobilizing Palestinian communities was the struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Indeed, Article 11 of the Palestinian National Charter (1968) stated that "the Palestinians will have three mottos: national unity (*wihda wataniyya*), national mobilization (*ta'bi'a qawmiyya*), and liberation (*tahreer*)." This mission gave the PLO a solid source of legitimacy and power. However, its

mandate came under scrutiny once the Palestinian National Council (PNC) formally shifted the political strategy from the struggle for liberation of all of Palestine to a two-state solution at its 1988 meeting in Algiers.

The shift in PLO strategy has meant three things. First, by abandoning the struggle for liberation of all of Palestine and focusing on the goal of statehood, the PLO moved its political weight and focus from the Palestinian diaspora and refugee communities to the West Bank and Gaza. This began the disconnect between the Palestinian people and their representative, which was further deepened by the failure of the Oslo Accords, signed between Israel and the PLO in the 1990s, and the creation of the PA.

Second, the change in the PLO's mission did not translate into a change in its organizational and decision-making structure, resulting in further paralysis and inefficiency. PLO decision-making was based on a quota system, which represented Palestinian resistance factions rather than Palestinian communities. Even though the PNC had allocated seats to Palestinian intellectuals, trade unions, women's groups, students, and other organized bodies – and some seats were independent or were held by other factions – many were affiliated with Fatah, which had dominated the PLO since 1968.

Given that the leadership of the PLO was not elected, the selection of representatives for its various bodies became an exercise in power sharing rather than a reflection of the changing composition of the Palestinian polity. This explains, in part, the PLO's domination by Fatah and the exclusion of the Islamic movements of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The agreement between 12 Palestinian factions in 2005, known as the Cairo Declaration, emphasized the need to reform the PLO based on consensus of all Palestinian factions. In fact, this is a mischaracterization of what reform means: the agreement involved dividing the cake amongst Palestinian factions rather

than enabling the Palestinian people to freely elect or select their representatives. It also assumed that Palestinian factions are as relevant a vehicle for political engagement as in the past.

Third, the initial social contract between the PLO and the Palestinian people was to mobilize Palestinians for armed struggle and national liberation. But the statehood project marked an abandonment of this goal for one in which only some Palestinians were to be served as "citizens" by their government. The PA provided the administrative, organizational, and political foundation – originally intended to be interim – on which the Palestinian leadership sought to build the future Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza along the 1967 borders. In addition, the influx of foreign aid ensured the PA's place as the governor of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza, and the de facto Palestinian representative in relations with Israel and the "peace process." The relevance of the PLO to the national movement thus further diminished and the Palestinian communities in refugee camps and in the diaspora were increasingly marginalized.

In short, despite the PLO's mandate of representation, fortified by international recognition in 1974, there have never been any accountability mechanisms within the PLO that would enable Palestinians to be consulted on divisive political decisions made on their behalf. As Osamah Khalil argues, the PNC and the PLO Executive Committee (EC) might have had a democratic mandate on paper whereby the former served as "the parliament for all Palestinians" and the latter as its executive arm. But in reality, the EC exercises great decision-making powers, including budgetary ones, while the PNC effectively functions as a rubber stamp for the EC's decisions.

A Path to Renewal?

At a time when there is a clear vacuum in leadership, we must ask what should be done to bring the PLO back to relevance. Firstly, and most importantly, the PLO

must be completely separated from the PA and, secondly, accountability mechanisms must be instituted and play a major part in the functioning of the PLO.

Separating the PLO from the PA is essential for several reasons. For one, in the personalized non-democratic rule of the PLO chair and PA president, current and prior, the institutions of the PLO and the PA have become his extended arms, serving to consolidate his rule and to implement his decisions. When the eyes and the money of the international community turned to the PA after Oslo, the PLO was rendered largely impotent.

For another, although the statehood project has not succeeded, many Palestinians still see it as one of the possible ways to fulfill Palestinian self-determination. At the same time, an increasing number of Palestinians believe that the national project must revert to that of a single democratic state in which full reparations are made and all are equal. For either outcome, Palestinians need to generate considerable power, greater than what they were able to muster in the 1960s and 1970s, and that strength cannot be generated without the PLO.

However, to be effective, the PLO must be accountable to the Palestinian people.

The concept of accountability stems from the idea that those who are entrusted with power and authority to serve a constituency must answer to them on how they are using their authority and resources, regardless of whether they are elected or appointed. It also means that constituents have the right to access and question their work and decisions, and to be able to express approval or dissent.

There are three critical elements for any accountability measure to be effective: *transparency* (making decisions, plans, and resources open for the public); *answerability* (representative leaders must provide justifications for their decisions to their people); and *enforceability* (there is a form of "punishment" when representatives fail, such as not being reelected or prosecuted by independent

internal institutions). Implementing these elements requires a democratic overhaul of the PLO mandate, institutions, and modus operandi.

To ensure their proper functioning, not only must the PLO Executive Committee be answerable to and scrutinized by the PNC, as is now the case on paper though not in practice, but both must be answerable to independent bodies to ensure that they fulfill their mandate, do not abuse their power, and are free from favoritism and corruption. Much thought must be given to the way such independent bodies are constituted. One approach could be to invite a panel of respected Palestinian lawyers and judges from across Palestine and the diaspora to constitute them.

Another equally important dimension of accountability is the link between the people and the authority that represents them. Instead of privileging the 12 Palestinian factions, the door must be open to all Palestinians to represent their people if elected or selected to do so freely and fairly. This poses a major but not insurmountable challenge. Efforts have been made to hold direct elections from which lessons can be learned. In addition, Palestinian leaders could, for example, invest in recreating community centers that act as venues for public hearings and consultations for Palestinians living in different parts of the world.

Palestinian embassies and representative offices are often overlooked in this regard. The PLO's international status is still solid and has been strengthened since the UN's recognition of Palestine as a non-member observer state in 2012. The embassies could contribute to reconstructing the sense of belonging among Palestinian communities wherever they have offices, for example, by holding public hearings for Palestinians in the diaspora to engage in political developments and examine how the leadership is responding to them. In many postings, however, they might need to work hard to reach beyond members of the community who are closely aligned with Fatah and the PA leadership.

The Palestinian political sphere has always been unique in its circumstances. But it

is precisely this uniqueness which impels us to question leadership, representation, and accountability. Indeed, it is this uniqueness which requires imagination and adaptability, particularly in the face of a fierce military occupation and discriminatory regime that denies refugees their right of return and Palestinian citizens of Israel their right to equality – a regime whose interest is to keep Palestinians, both people and leadership, fragmented and divided.

Nevertheless, the contemporary history of the Palestinian people holds abundant examples of success in mass political organization and mobilization, such as the Palestinian uprising against the British mandate in 1936-39, the early years of the PLO itself, and the First Intifada. These and other experiences can serve as a reminder and a guiding compass of the Palestinian people's ability to shape their own future.

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