COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Reconstituting the PLO: Any Place for Hamas and Islamic Jihad?

By: Belal Shobaki · September, 2022

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.

When Ahmad Al-Shuqairi founded the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, he envisioned an entity that represented all Palestinians. However, he could not realize this vision because Fatah expressed its lack of confidence in him and his PLO policy in a statement to the December 9, 1967, meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo. Fatah had previously spoken out against Arab guardianship of the Palestinian cause and of the need to liberate Palestine through armed struggle. Hamas and Islamic Jihad's current position toward the PLO's political platform resembles that of Fatah in the late 1960s.

However, the position of the two Islamist movements has been based not only on criticism of the PLO's political platform and organizational structure, but also on doctrinal grounds. While it took Fatah just one year to accede to the PLO after issuing its 1967 statement, neither Hamas nor Islamic Jihad have been able to join to this day. This is mainly due to the fact that, for many years, neither movement could separate its political from its religious beliefs without completely undermining its core tenets and losing its constituencies. However, in the last three

decades they have spent in the Palestinian arena, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, particularly Hamas, have evolved their position toward the PLO.

This paper discusses the evolution of each Islamist movement over the past three decades as well as its growing pragmatism. It discusses the ways in which the obstacles to bringing the two organizations into the fold are now more political than doctrinal, and identifies the entry points to rebuilding the Palestinian national movement.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Long Road to the Cairo Declaration

When Hamas issued its charter in 1988, it addressed the PLO in Article 27:

The Palestine Liberation Organization is the closest to the heart of the Islamic Resistance Movement…We share the same homeland, the same calamity, the same fate and the same enemy. Influenced by the circumstances surrounding its founding, the intellectual confusion prevalent in the Arab world…the PLO embraced the idea of a secular state… Secular ideology is diametrically opposed to religious ideology. Ideology determines positions, modes of conduct, and resolutions. Therefore, while the Islamic Resistance Movement expresses appreciation for the PLO…it cannot exchange the present and future Islamic nature of Palestine for secular thought…It is when the PLO adopts Islam as the guideline for life that we shall become its soldiers and the fuel of its fire which will burn the enemies.

These positive words about the PLO could not bridge the secular-religious divide between the two movements. Indeed, Hamas's position suggests that it sought to rule from the outset. While presenting itself as a liberation movement against the occupation, Hamas had a clear vision of the future of Palestine as an Islamic country where Islam was practiced as a way of life. Its position also suggested that

the PLO's failure to embrace Islam in this way would prevent Hamas from joining ranks with Fatah against the occupation, and even that it would not fight the occupation under the umbrella of the PLO. In fact, Hamas repeatedly called for acts of resistance during the First Intifada that were different from those called for by factions in the PLO. In response, the PLO questioned Hamas's patriotism and accused the movement of sabotaging the national consensus.

Given that Hamas's charter did not fully address the organization's position on the PLO as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, Hamas later issued clearer statements regarding the mechanisms used to constitute the Palestine National Council (PNC), as well as the PLO's political platform. For example, in its April 1990 reply to then PNC chairman Abdul Hamid Al-Sayeh's invitation to participate in preparations for the forthcoming session of the PNC, Hamas spelled out two of its core disagreements with the PLO:

- The legitimacy of the PLO's representation of the Palestinian people is conditional on the PNC's reflection of the different factions' respective weight based on elections or appointments;
- The PLO's political platform must not contradict the beliefs of the Muslim Palestinian people as set out in Hamas's charter, which stipulates that relinquishing any part of the land violates Islamic doctrine, and that separating the political from the religious empties civil movements, institutions, and organizations of any meaningful role.

As the First Intifada quieted down and the Oslo era began, the PLO entered a state of suspended animation, while the Hamas charter was a neglected document to which no one referred other than scholars in their research and Israeli politicians in their efforts to condemn Hamas in diplomatic forums or media outlets. During the 1990s, Fatah was preoccupied with running the Palestinian

Authority (PA) under occupation and sidelined the PLO, while Hamas undertook armed resistance, becoming not only Israel's target but also that of the PA security forces.

The failure of the Camp David talks in 2000 to transform the PA into a Palestinian state, and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, inaugurated a new phase in which PLO factions returned to resistance against the occupation alongside Hamas and Islamic Jihad. As in the case of the First Intifada, the latter's resistance was not carried out under the same political umbrella. However, internal Palestinian disagreements were less acute, particularly given Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's widescale invasion of the occupied Palestinian lands.

By the end of the Second Intifada, the PLO was still in a coma although there were now attempts to resurrect it by the same Fatah organization that had sidelined it for years. This was due to the death of PLO Chairman and PA President Yasser Arafat, the election of Mahmoud Abbas who opposed military action, Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, and post-Intifada intra-Palestinian talks that culminated in the Cairo Declaration of 2005.

The Cairo Declaration achieved a Palestinian consensus on the need to revive the PLO, especially after Israeli attempts to undermine the PA. Indeed, the political parties gathered in Cairo believed that maintaining the PLO's irrelevance was tantamount to political suicide. The Declaration stated that those gathered agreed to:

develop the Palestine Liberation Organization on bases that will be settled consensually in order to include all the Palestinian powers and factions, as the organization is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. To do so it has been agreed to form a committee to define these bases, and the committee will be made up of the president of the National Council, the members of the PLO's Executive Committee, the secretaries general of all Palestinian

factions and independent national personalities. The president of the executive committee will convene this committee.

For Hamas, the Cairo Declaration represented a clear shift from its former positions. Partly as a result of the Declaration, it decided to participate in the second elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) even though the council had been created as part of the Oslo Accords, which it considered treasonous. Indeed, Hamas had refused to participate in the 1996 PLC elections and banned its members from doing so. However, Hamas considered the Accords invalidated when Sharon's tanks demolished the PA's headquarters. It also attributed Israel's withdrawal from Gaza to its resistance. Local and international stakeholders either approved of or turned a blind eye to Hamas's participation, thinking it would domesticate it and contain it within the PA framework, as was unequivocally stated by then US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice.

The Cairo Declaration was also a sharp departure from Islamic Jihad's early statements. Despite the fact that Islamic Jihad rarely clashed with the PLO and Fatah since it is not a rival in attracting constituents, its position was not very different from that of Hamas. Its founder and Secretary General Fathi Shaqaqi set out the position:

[The] points of weakness in the Palestinian national project lie in the national political ideology itself that excluded Islam. At the same time, the traditional Islamic movement was not involved in the Palestinian cause…Those who embraced Islamic ideology did not engage in Palestine, while those who did (the national movement) excluded Islam from their intellectual and revolutionary rhetoric. We, on the other hand, have discovered that Palestine was a fundamental part of the Quran, and so realized that the Palestinian cause was central to the Islamic movement and the Islamic and Arab nation.[1]

Beyond the Lost Years of Division

By signing the Cairo Declaration, with its call to revive the PLO on the basis of consensus, Hamas and Islamic Jihad believed that the issue of the PLO's ideology as well as the question of the adoption of Islam had been transcended. Based on this declaration, both movements could join the PLO since the prerequisites for accession were procedural rather than substantive.

However, subsequent political developments thwarted any constructive way forward. In 2006, Hamas won the legislative elections, but Fatah, as well as regional and international actors, refused to accept this outcome and sought to sabotage its rule. In 2007, Hamas allowed its military wing to secure control of Gaza. Ever since, the Palestinian national movement has been riven by internecine fighting and Palestinians have expended most of their political energy in managing the Fatah-Hamas division, rather than building on the successes of the Cairo Declaration, in order to revive the PLO. The cost to the Palestinian people and their cause has been little short of disastrous.

Developments in the last few years have made it more possible to consider a revival of the PLO, although there are still institutional jealousies to overcome. For example, Fatah is said to be keen to revive the PLO so as to create a new space outside the PA that would cut Hamas down to size. Moreover, Fatah is believed to want to revive the PLO without reforms or elections – a key point of disagreement. It has also demanded that Hamas and Islamic Jihad recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people without preconditions, which both movements have repeatedly rejected.

Nevertheless, pressures on both movements, as well as the regional transformations associated with the Arab uprisings, declining Syrian and Iranian support, and the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have pushed Hamas

and Islamic Jihad to alter their political discourse, including on the PLO.

Hamas's 2017 document of general principles and policies has superseded the original charter, stating that "the PLO is a national framework for the Palestinian people inside and outside of Palestine. It should therefore be preserved, developed, and rebuilt on democratic foundations so as to secure the participation of all the constituents and forces of the Palestinian people, in a manner that safeguards Palestinian rights." This statement gives a clear indication that Hamas is paying more attention to democratic frameworks and political rights rather than referring back to its old Islamist literature. This major shift can be used to facilitate Hamas's joining the PLO.

As for Islamic Jihad, although its new document in 2018 reaffirmed that the PLO did not represent the entire Palestinian people and had to be reconfigured, it did not invoke Shaqaqi's rhetoric about grounding national action in Islamic teachings. It instead called for rebuilding the PLO through democratic means. Islamic Jihad's refusal to sign the closing statement of the 2019 Moscow meetings was fully in line with its political document: It rejects the description of the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people without reference to the need for reform and for PNC elections.

Ending the Divide and Rebuilding the PLO

This paper has sought to show the ways in which Hamas and Islamic Jihad have evolved their position vis-à-vis the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people from the 1980s to the Cairo Declaration of 2005 and the subverted elections of 2006. It has not sought to address the impact of this divide on the Palestinian national project or on the fate of the Palestinian people. Rather, it has focused on the significant shifts in Hamas and Islamic Jihad from a doctrinal approach to governance to a democratic one.

The pressures on both Hamas and Fatah have been growing. The PA as a national structure has been eroded and its functional roles have been augmented. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are stumbling because of the siege, regional transformations, and their heavy engagement in running public affairs in Gaza while they continue to be undermined in the West Bank. Both factions also have to face the ongoing repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perhaps the most significant development driving Palestinians to the PLO is external to the Palestinian body politic: Not only have years-long attempts to achieve a political settlement with Israel failed, but Israel's move to directly annex the West Bank, following on from its annexation of East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan, has left not even the pretense of the possibility of a negotiated settlement.

The Palestinian need for effective and representative leadership has never been stronger. Currently, there is not a single political body that can claim to be the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and there are no proposals to create such a body. All factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, recognize the importance of, and the need to, revitalize the PLO and to recover its powers and authorities. Hamas and Islamic Jihad have transcended their earlier condition that the PLO adopt Islam as a way of life.

The 2005 Cairo Declaration is still a solid basis for reconvening the political factions that are the key constituency of the PLO. Hamas's 2017 political document and that of Islamic Jihad in 2018 also contribute to the way forward. The consensus around the need to reform and revitalize the PLO must lead to a consensus on the method of electing the PNC. Agreement needs to be reached on the mechanisms for elections where possible, and on other methods to ensure the representation of Palestinians unable to take part in polls. The mandate of the newly constituted PNC would include the revision of the PLO's political program and the establishment of committees to rebuild and restructure PLO institutions in accordance with that political program – institutions that represent all

Palestinians.

The Palestinian people at home and in exile have shown over the course of a century that they are capable of recreating their national project for self-determination, freedom, and rights. This paper makes a modest contribution by showing that some of the basic elements are there and can – and must – be used without delay.

1. *Rifat Sayed Ahmad, Blood Beats the Sword: The Complete Works of Dr. Fathi Al-Shaqaqi, (Cairo: Jaffa Center for Studies and Research, 1997), 78.*

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