

REVIVING A PALESTINIAN POWER

THE DIASPORA AND THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

By Zaha Hassan, Nadia Hijab, Inès Abdel Razek, and Mona Younis



TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Preface</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Chapter 1 Addressing the Crisis of the Palestinian National Movement</u>	<u>5</u>
The Existential Challenges Facing the Palestinian National Project	
The Focus of this Study	
The Evolution of the PLO and its Representation of the Palestinian People	
The Relevance of the PLO in the Diaspora	
<u>Chapter 2 The Slow Erosion of the PLO's Status</u>	<u>10</u>
The Early Fruits Secured by the PLO Diplomatic Corps	
Growing Tensions in a Diplomatic Corps with Two Heads	
The Abbas Era: Restructuring the Corps	
Suspending the Activity of the PLO Political Bureau	
Additional PLO Bodies with Foreign Affairs/Diaspora Capacities	
<u>Chapter 3 The Functioning of the Diplomatic Corps</u>	<u>16</u>
Resourcing the Corps	
Staffing: Activists vs. Civil Servants	
Palestinian Representation Abroad: Successes and Challenges	
Relations with the Diaspora: More Consular than Political	
<u>Chapter 4 The Diplomatic Corps' Engagement with the Diaspora</u>	<u>20</u>
The Bid for Statehood: PLO-Diaspora Engagement for National Objectives	
Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem	
The Issues Raised by the 2018 PNC Elections	
<u>Chapter 5 The Growing Alienation of the Diaspora and Solidarity Groups</u>	<u>26</u>
<u>Chapter 6 Recommendations: Reviving the Power and Potential of the PLO</u>	<u>30</u>
Recommendations to Diaspora Palestinians	
Recommendations to the PLO	
Areas for Further Research	
<u>Annex 1: Methodology</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>Annex 2: List of Interviewees</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>Annex 3: Mapping Institutional Responsibilities for Foreign Affairs</u>	<u>35</u>

PREFACE

The vital question of how to reconstitute and strengthen the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and renew the Palestinian national project has long been at the forefront of Palestinian concerns. However, it stalled due to the bitter divisions between the major political parties, Fatah and Hamas, after the legislative elections of 2006. There is now renewed urgency to revive the national project following the [normalization of relations](#) between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain in 2020.

Yet, during the discussions by Palestinian factions to map a way forward the Palestinian diaspora and the role it could play in reviving the PLO and the national project was conspicuously absent. Rather, the focus was on elections in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT) of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, despite Israel's complete control and ability to subvert any meaningful outcomes. It is too early to judge the reconciliation initiative by the factions, but there is so far little recognition that the diaspora has freedom of action and resources that are not available to the Palestinians under occupation or to the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

This study takes up the question of how this key constituency of the PLO – Palestinian diaspora communities – might reinvigorate the PLO's representative character so that the organization may be able to develop an effective national strategy and be better equipped to respond to the extraordinary challenges facing the Palestinian people.

The assumption underlying the study is that a more active and regular engagement between the diaspora and the PLO diplomatic missions abroad could contribute to strengthening the PLO, make it more attuned to the challenges and concerns of the Palestinian people, better position it to withstand threats to Palestinian rights and sovereignty, and contribute to the diaspora's strategic mobilization in the countries where Palestinians reside. A PLO that is not engaged with the Palestinian

people, particularly with those residing outside historic Palestine, guarantees diaspora disengagement from its representatives, which in turn guarantees a non-representative PLO. Thus, at a more fundamental level, revitalizing the relationship between the diaspora and the PLO via the Palestinian diplomatic corps is critical to the legitimacy of the PLO as a reflection of the will of the Palestinian people.

To answer the question posed by the study, the authors reviewed the diplomatic corps' legal foundations as well as the rules governing its functions; the relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and how they divide responsibilities for the management of the corps; and the corps' effectiveness by selecting representative missions to better understand the engagement within the host country and with the Palestinian communities the corps is also meant to represent.¹ In addition, the study zeroes in on three specific events to assess the corps' engagement with the diaspora: Palestine's statehood bid between 2011 and 2012; former US President Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2017; and the PLO National Council elections of 2018 (see Annex 1 for the methodology).

Eight Palestinian missions were selected for study based on a set of criteria that included the country's influence in global and Palestinian affairs, its regional location, the size of the Palestinian community, and our ability to identify members of the diaspora and solidarity groups in those countries. We interviewed 35 people including from the missions, diaspora, and solidarity groups, as well as former diplomats and experts (see Annex 2 for list of interviewees).

This study was always intended to be a limited exercise given the resources available to the authors and the fact that it was the first of its kind. It should be seen as the beginning of an effort to understand the structure and functioning of the PLO diplomatic corps and

¹ Although Al-Shabaka's house style abbreviates the Palestinian National Authority as PA, this study uses the abbreviation PNA to underscore the "national" originally at the heart of the project.

its contribution to the organization at large. Many challenges were faced along the way. For example, identifying the relationship between the PLO and PNA structures and finding supporting materials involved a major excavation as well as double-checking against the information provided by different sources. This was perhaps not surprising given that the PLO developed largely underground for the first decade of its existence and was attacked for years, attacks that were redoubled during the Trump administration.

Moreover, there is an ongoing but incomplete transfer of powers from the PLO to the PNA that includes the diplomatic corps and that makes it difficult to pinpoint roles, responsibilities and resources. In addition, it was difficult to secure interviews with the full complement of missions as well as with representatives of the diaspora and solidarity organizations from each of the selected countries. Nevertheless, we succeeded in securing the information necessary in which to ground our analysis and recommendations, and several former and current PLO diplomats and staff have been largely supportive of the study and its aims, as have the other interlocutors.

The study was carried out by a team of four women, all established experts and members of Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. Nadia Hijab conceived the idea, wrote the concept note, and authored much of the report; Zaha Hassan, who came on board later in the process, undertook extensive research and authored the bulk of the report; Inès Abdel Razek conducted most of the interviews; and Mona Younis developed the methodology and interview protocols. All remained engaged throughout to produce the study.

We would like to thank Diana Buttu who played a key role in the early months, taking the concept forward, developing the approach, and participating in reviews. We would also like to thank Mazen Arafat, Leila Shahid, Jamil Hilal, and Sara Husseini for serving on the review panel; their support, feedback and dedication enriched this study tremendously. In addition, we wish to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed for this study for their time, interest, and commitment to Palestinian rights; many of the interviewees preferred to remain anonymous and we respected their wishes. And, last but not least, we wish to thank the Al-Shabaka team for their advice and support, and in particular Alaa Tartir for his detailed comments.

The study does not include an examination of the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the OPT and the countries hosting Palestinian refugees and exiles. In many cases, the pandemic promoted coordination between the diaspora and the diplomatic corps; the PNA Foreign Ministry and PLO missions worked closely with the diaspora to channel funding, medical supplies, and other support to the OPT which helped shore up the response and capacities of the Palestinian healthcare system. However, there were also reports of thousands of [Palestinians stranded](#) outside the OPT, including many students, who felt they [did not get the support](#) they needed from their missions. These issues, which involved transit countries, were mostly resolved after some weeks.

These two facets of the PLO diplomatic corps are what our study seeks to address: the potential of the corps when it is functioning at its best, as well as the problems and gaps when it is not. Our hope is that the study will renew appreciation for the potential of the PLO and its diplomatic corps, and breathe new life into the engagement between it and the diaspora so that this regular exchange of ideas and feedback may serve as a mechanism for strengthening Palestinian institutions, unifying the people, and supporting the fulfillment of the inalienable rights of Palestinians everywhere.

Zaha Hassan, Nadia Hijab, Inès Abdel Razek, and Mona Younis



CHAPTER 1:

ADDRESSING THE CRISIS OF THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The Existential Challenges Facing the Palestinian National Project

The Palestinian national project is experiencing both internal and external challenges. Internally, the most critical challenges stem from the diminished representative character of the PLO as a result of the ascendance of the PNA, a construct of the Oslo Accords principally established to guarantee Israel's security until the conclusion of a permanent agreement. Externally, and with the erosion of the two-state solution, Israel continues to threaten de jure annexation of some 30% of the West Bank while expanding its normalization agreements with an increasing number of Arab states.

Given that the implementation of PLO decisions is now delegated to the consolidated offices of the PNA president and the PLO chairman, the necessary process of reassessing the utility and functions of the PNA has been repeatedly postponed. Although all factions pledged in September 2020 to unify their efforts to push back against normalization and to promote the national project, the overlapping competencies and powers of the PNA and PLO are likely to continue to complicate national reconciliation between the Fatah-led PNA and Hamas, which is not yet a member of the PLO and which continues to oppose the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO.

Among the most critical external challenges is the colonization of the OPT which has become entrenched both in fact and in Israeli law. The so-called Jewish Nation State Basic Law,² giving Jewish people an exclusive right to self-determination anywhere Israel extends its sovereignty, means that Israel's territorial intentions may not end with partial annexation of the West Bank. This leaves Palestinians in both Israel and the OPT in a precarious legal position that could set the stage for their mass displacement. And, as facts are established on the ground and laws are passed consolidating Israeli control over the West Bank, the Israeli government has been working to neutralize – with some success – international criticism from parts of Europe and the Arab world. As a result, the PLO can no longer take for granted an international consensus on a just resolution to the conflict.

Alongside this sobering reality, the stated US policy in the Middle East has shifted. The actions taken by the Trump administration, including [relocating the US embassy](#) from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and [new federal legislation](#)³ affecting the status and financial viability of the PLO, may be difficult to reverse or repeal with a new administration, even with a Democrat-controlled Congress. The so-called “[peace plan](#)” released by the Trump administration effectively greenlights Israeli annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank and promises Israel US political recognition.

A number of former US officials now argue that the US should simply get out of the business of Palestine-Israel peacemaking given the [failure of the two-state project](#), though most do not call for ending US security assistance to Israel even as an apartheid reality is increasingly imposed on Palestinians. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the human and economic devastation that it has visited upon every corner of the world, it is unlikely that the European Union or other countries will provide the same level of support to Palestinians in the OPT. And with Gulf states beginning to

normalize with Israel – and with their economies reeling from falling oil prices – the PLO and PNA will not be able to rely on financial assistance from Arab patron-states to support Palestinian steadfastness on the land.

The Focus of this Study

At this critical juncture, the PLO must reevaluate the platform it adopted in 1988 towards establishing a state in the remaining 22% of historic Palestine that was occupied by Israel in 1967, and develop a strategy toward a renewed political agenda that preserves the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, endeavors to realize their national aspirations, and supports their presence on the land. These discussions are on the agenda of the talks between Fatah, Hamas, and other factions that began in September 2020. Any strategy, however, must be true to the PLO National Covenant pillars of “unity, mobilization and liberation,” must capture the imagination of Palestinians, must overcome their disaffection with the traditional leadership, and must inspire them to action wherever they may be. National unity, in particular, is a prerequisite to moving forward.

The next generation of Palestinians who stand to inherit the struggle for national liberation, including those in the diaspora, are disconnected from the PLO and its political program.

This study takes up the question of how a key constituency of the PLO, Palestinian diaspora communities,⁴ might re-engage with the PLO in order to reinvigorate its representative character. By doing so, the organization

² For an explanation of how the Basic Law has been part and parcel of Israeli negotiating positions since the start of the Oslo peace process, see Zaha Hassan, “[Trump’s Plan for Israel and Palestine](#): One More Step Away from Peace.”

³ On April 15, 2020, the provisions of ATCA establishing jurisdiction over the PA if the PA maintained social welfare payments to prisoners and martyrs’ families, was triggered, making the PA liable for over \$650 million in previously dismissed damage claims brought by families of victims of the 2nd Intifada. More information is [available at this link](#).

⁴ The term “Palestinian diaspora” is used in this study to refer to those Palestinians who fled or were forced out from Palestine by Zionist forces during the lead up to the creation of the State of Israel in 1947 and 1948, and in the aftermath, and whom Israel has systematically prevented from returning to their homes and property. In addition, it includes those who fled or were forced out by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israel war, and those who have been deported or exiled by Israel since then, or who were compelled to leave for reasons related to the enduring and oppressive nature of Israeli military occupation.

may be able to develop an effective national strategy and be better equipped to respond to the extraordinary challenges facing Palestinians wherever they live. The assumption underlying the study is that a more active and regular engagement between the diaspora and the PLO diplomatic missions abroad would contribute to strengthening the PLO, make it more attuned to the challenges and concerns of the Palestinian people, better position it to withstand threats to Palestinian rights and sovereignty, and contribute to the diaspora's strategic mobilization in countries where Palestinians reside.

We recognize that Palestinian diaspora experiences with the PLO differ from country to country and across different time periods, a subject that is worth much more in-depth study. Nevertheless, it is safe to assert that a PLO that is not responsive to the people, particularly to those residing outside historic Palestine, guarantees diaspora disengagement from diplomatic missions, which in turn guarantees a non-representative PLO. Thus, at a more fundamental level, revitalizing the relationship between the diaspora and Palestinian diplomatic corps is critical to the legitimacy of the PLO as a reflection of the will of the Palestinian people.

The Evolution of the PLO and its Representation of the Palestinian People

The Palestinian national struggle began with the forced displacement of three quarters of the indigenous population from historic Palestine in 1947-48. Naturally, justice for these refugees, premised on return and restitution of property, was and still is the principal Palestinian demand. After the PLO was founded in 1964, and more particularly, when control over the organization moved from the Arab League to the Palestinians themselves after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the organization offered a vehicle for the expression of the will of those in exile. Founded and led by diaspora

Palestinians, the PLO found its first support⁵ among the largely refugee population in Gaza⁶ and came of age in the camps around Amman and Beirut before its forced evacuation to Tunis in 1982 that was to last a decade. After the October Arab-Israeli War of 1973, the PLO slowly began a strategic shift from refugee return and self-determination in historic Palestine to a sovereign state in occupied Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as the end-goal of resistance. The PNC formally adopted this political program in 1988.

When the organization was able to operate openly in the OPT following the launch of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the priorities and the engagement between the PLO and the diaspora changed markedly. Hamas, as well as important secular PLO political factions with diaspora constituencies, opposed signing an interim agreement⁷ with Israel because they believed it would legitimize Israeli presence on Palestinian land and undermine refugee rights. Moreover, the PNA, which was created as an interim governing body, represents only Palestinian residents of the OPT. With time, discord within the PLO also festered as the organization and its various departments were hollowed out in favor of the donor-supported PNA and its ministries. While the PNA Foreign Ministry's mandate includes "expatriate affairs," the rights of the Palestinian refugees, in addition to diaspora interests and concerns, have been largely subordinated in favor of the political initiative to gain international recognition for the State of Palestine, and to obtain funding and support for Palestinian state-building.⁸

The PLO's vitality and character have also been negatively impacted by the physical and political fragmentation of the Palestinian body politic. The two principal Palestinian political factions, the ruling-party, Fatah, and its rival, Hamas, have so far been incapable or unwilling to forge a path to national reconciliation since the 2007 schism between them, which left the Islamic movement in control of Gaza, home to almost

⁵ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 116-117.

⁶ Before the Nakba, the population of Gaza was 80,000. Following the end of hostilities, it was 280,000. Filiu, *Gaza: A History*, 71, citing Beryl Cheal, "Refugees in the Gaza Strip, December 1948-May 1950," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 18, 1 (1988): 143.

⁷ For a discussion of the history of the polarization of the Palestinian politic between Hamas and the Fatah-led PA, see, Jamil Hilal, "The Polarization of the Palestinian Political Field," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 39 (Spring 2010): 24-39.

⁸ Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour, "Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Project," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 20, 2 (2011): 6-25. For a discussion of how state-building has also undermined the interests of the Palestinian people, including those living under PNA civil authority, see Alaa Tartir, "[What is a state without the People?](#) Statehood Obsession and Denial of Rights in Palestine."

two million Palestinians who have since then lived under a draconian Israeli siege. The failure so far to bring the Islamist factions under the PLO umbrella has contributed to weakening the national liberation movement and its ability to respond to threats as a united front.⁹

Though PLO policy-making bodies have periodically convened to discuss the challenges facing the movement, the resolutions they have passed [calling for specific action](#), including ending security coordination with Israel, were left to the discretion of the chairman of the PLO. In the wake of Israel's official declaration of its intent to illegally annex further areas of the OPT, Mahmoud Abbas temporarily stopped [security and administrative coordination](#) with Israel. It remains to be seen how the [unity efforts](#) launched in September 2020 progress and the extent to which this process will develop a blueprint for strategic action.

The next generation of Palestinians who stand to inherit the struggle for national liberation, including those in the diaspora, are disconnected from the PLO and its political program, which remains committed to an increasingly unlikely vision of an independent state in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. This generation has had no connection with the PLO and its ancillary “feeder” mechanisms of the past, including student and professional organizations, unions, women's groups, summer camps, and conferences,¹⁰ to name a few. Many lack an appreciation for how critical international recognition of the PLO was in establishing Palestinian national identity on the global stage and in attaining recognition of the right of Palestinians to self-determination and sovereignty. Most came of age after the Oslo Accords were signed, and consider the PLO to be indistinguishable from the PNA, which, as noted earlier, was only intended to be an interim governing body representing Palestinian residents of the OPT. In the view of these young Palestinians, the PLO as it stands now neither represents the Palestinians living on

the land of Palestine, nor the more than six million¹¹ residing outside in the diaspora.¹² Thus, even if the PLO were to articulate a clear national strategy, as the situation stands today, this critical constituency would unlikely be inspired to action.

What is the Relevance of the PLO in the Diaspora?

If, as this study assumes, the PLO has lost considerable legitimacy among Palestinians within and outside of the historic homeland, why should the diaspora be concerned with rehabilitating its relationship with the PLO in the first place? And why does this study focus and prioritize the engagement and mobilization of diaspora Palestinians? Before proceeding with the study's findings, it is necessary to make the case for the importance of diaspora engagement with the PLO, to recall the role the PLO has played in preserving Palestinian national identity, and to take stock of the extent to which it remains a critical vehicle for justice and accountability, and the realization of the national aspirations of the Palestinian people. It is also important to note the invaluable role the diaspora can and must still play in advancing Palestinian rights.

Simply put, without the PLO, Palestinians would be without a national address.

The PLO has been the embodiment of the Palestinian national movement since its founding in 1964. International recognition of the PLO, achieved a decade later, established Palestinian self-determination as an integral component of, if not a prerequisite to, resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Prior to that, the Global North largely viewed the Palestinian

⁹ See, for example, the [call by Palestinian diaspora communities](#) in Europe for national unity and reform of the PLO following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and Israel's looming de jure annexation of parts of the West Bank, “Palestinians in Europe Call for End of Internal Division.” See also, the [open letter to President Mahmoud Abbas](#) from Palestinian progressives and intellectuals for reforms, published by Masarat: The Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies.

¹⁰ Jamal R. Nassar, *The Palestine Liberation Organization: From Armed Struggle to the Declaration of Independence*, (New York: Praeger, 1991), 30-33.

¹¹ For census data on Palestinian population growth, see the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [2017 report](#).

¹² For a discussion on the crisis of leadership, see [Al-Shabaka's Policy Circle](#), “Palestinian leadership: What a New Model Might Look Like.”

question as a humanitarian issue that could be resolved without consultation with refugees themselves. Political recognition restored Palestine and Palestinian nationhood to international consciousness, centered it within the larger context of Arab-Israeli peace, and ultimately compelled Israel and the US to deal with Palestinians as a people entitled to self-determination and rights. Simply put, without the PLO, Palestinians would be without a national address.

The PLO recognized that maintaining a strong relationship with the Palestinian diaspora was critical to its *raison d'être*. Thus, only one year after its founding, the PLO established the Department of Popular Mobilization which was responsible for organizing general unions of students, women and labor syndicates, as well as councils within the refugee camps referred to above.¹³ These popular bodies, and the summer camps and conferences they organized¹⁴ across different countries of exile, gave the PLO some of its early activists and cadres.

Since its founding, the PLO and its representative offices have been fundamental in preserving the international consensus around the norms buttressing a just resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, norms that are the basis for the UN resolutions which uphold Palestinian rights, for referrals brought to the International Criminal Court, for advisory opinions sought in the International Court of Justice, and for communications and inter-state complaints submitted to UN mechanisms such as the [Committee to Eliminate All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#). Without the PLO, there would be no recognized national body representing Palestinians in critical forums and foreign capitals, and the international consensus and norms Palestinians rely on before multilateral institutions and governments would have been much easier to undermine or call into question. This is why pro-Israel lobby groups spend so much time and resources delegitimizing, criminalizing,

and defaming Palestinian representative bodies in key capitals like Washington, DC, and Brussels.

Diaspora Palestinians have played a critical role in maintaining support for Palestinian rights within their adopted countries, and they are key to the fulfillment of national objectives. Many are citizens of liberal democracies where they are free to engage in advocacy, and can impact public opinion and the policies of their governments. They are not captive to the political stalemate existing between the two main Palestinian political factions and do not face the restrictions that their counterparts do in Gaza, the West Bank, and other parts of the Arab world hosting Palestinian refugees and diaspora communities. The distance between diaspora Palestinians and their historic homeland provides them with unique insights and perspective on how freedom, justice, and equality for the Palestinian people as a whole might best be pursued on the international level. Their active participation in the struggle for Palestinian liberation and rights stands to greatly enrich the national debate on strategy and tactics.

In short, at a time when Palestinian national leadership has been at its weakest and the efforts to extinguish the Palestinian national project are at their strongest, the Palestinian diaspora must be seen as a major source of power for the PLO and the Palestinian people. Because PLO missions and representative offices exist in over 100 countries,¹⁵ they have the capacity to function as a conduit between the diaspora and the PLO, enabling the sharing of information and ideas, and creating mechanisms for interaction. Strategically utilized, the Palestinian diplomatic corps and the PLO missions could play a critical role in reconnecting the diaspora to the work of the PLO, and in reinvigorating the relationship between the two as a preliminary step toward making the PLO a better representative of Palestinians wherever they may be, and toward empowering Palestinians to better serve their national cause.

¹³ Nassar, *Palestine Liberation Organization*, 69.

¹⁴ Ibid, 30-33.

¹⁵ For a 2011 list of countries where Palestinian missions and embassies are located, see the archived [website of the Permanent Mission of Palestine to the UN](#). An update of the list will be available on the [website of the PNA Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#).



CHAPTER 2: THE SLOW EROSION OF THE PLO'S STATUS

The signing of the Oslo Accords and the creation of the PNA negatively impacted the once organic relationship between the Palestinian diaspora and the PLO and its various departments.

Initially, the PNA ministries operated in parallel with those departments of the PLO meant to engage with, serve, and mobilize the diaspora. This changed over time with the result that these departments have been hollowed out almost completely in favor of the PNA ministries. As PLO Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi points out: “The Jerusalemites, as well

as the Palestinian refugees and exiles, felt abandoned by the PLO, whose jurisdiction began to narrow down to part of the people on part of the land for a temporary period of time, and only through the PNA.”¹⁶ This development contributed to the belief throughout the diaspora that its rights and concerns were no longer a priority to the Palestinian leadership. The sections below examine the traditional role played by the PLO in foreign affairs and diaspora relations, and how the shift in favor of the PNA took place.

¹⁶ Hanan Ashrawi, *The Case for Democracy in the Palestinian National Narrative* (Houston: Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, October 20, 2009), 23.

The Early Fruits Secured by the PLO Diplomatic Corps

Very early on, the PLO began establishing representative offices in foreign capitals as a way to build international support for Palestinian self-determination and rights, in addition to serving diaspora interests. The PLO Political Bureau was the central node of the PLO's national liberation strategy. The first PLO mission outside of the Arab region was established in China in 1965,¹⁷ only a year after the PLO's founding and before some Arab countries had formally recognized the organization as the representative of the Palestinian people. Though there was no significant Palestinian population residing in the country, the relationship was deemed important as a way to center the Palestinian national movement as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggle. The relationship resulted in the channeling of weapons and the provision of training to the PLO and its factions.¹⁸

Serious international advocacy and foreign relations work commenced after the UN and the Arab League recognized the PLO in 1974. Following the PNC's adoption of Palestine's "Declaration of Independence" in 1988 and the acceleration of the internationalization strategy, the PLO Political Bureau functioned as a quasi-ministry of foreign affairs representing the Palestinian people to governments around the world and in international organizations,¹⁹ with the aim of advancing the Palestinian political program of return and restoration of rights. By 1993, the PLO had offices in more than 100 countries. Yet unlike other countries, PLO offices and representatives abroad were still, first and foremost, representatives of a people and not of a state.

[The] PLO ... retains, to this day, the sole official capacity to negotiate international agreements on behalf of the entire Palestinian people.

Today, the State of Palestine is recognized by 137 countries, and it hosts 42 foreign missions in Ramallah. There are also eight [general consulates](#) in Jerusalem that are accredited to the PNA.²⁰ The existence of these consulates predates the creation of the state of Israel and their mandate covers Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Growing Tensions in a Diplomatic Corps with Two Heads

For a decade following the establishment of the PNA in 1994, the PLO remained officially responsible for diplomacy and it retains, to this day, the sole official capacity to negotiate international agreements on behalf of the entire Palestinian people. The Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Oslo II), signed in 1995, specifically prohibited the PNA from conducting foreign relations.²¹ Thus, if the PNA wished to open a diplomatic mission abroad or host a foreign mission in the OPT, Oslo II required that it relate to economic development.²² When the PNA engaged with the international community on projects

17 Raphael Israeli, "The People's Republic of China and the PLO: From Honeymoon to Conjugal Routine," in Augustus Richard Norton and Martin Greenberg, eds., *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 144.

18 Nassar, *Palestine Liberation Organization*, 165-166.

19 Ibid, 68.

20 Including the delegation of the Holy See, and [excluding the US consulate](#) that has been dismantled by the Trump administration.

21 Article IX-5(a), September 28, 1995: "a. In accordance with the DOP, the Council will not have powers and responsibilities in the sphere of foreign relations, which sphere includes the establishment abroad of embassies, consulates or other types of foreign missions and posts or permitting their establishment in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, the appointment of or admission of diplomatic and consular staff, and the exercise of diplomatic functions." See also Article XVII: / 1. In accordance with the DOP, the jurisdiction of the Council will cover West Bank and Gaza Strip territory as a single territorial unit, except for: / a. issues that will be negotiated in the permanent status negotiations: Jerusalem, settlements, specified military locations, Palestinian refugees, borders, foreign relations and Israelis; and / b. powers and responsibilities not transferred to the Council."

22 See Article IX, Section 5(c), of the Oslo II Interim Agreement: "Dealings between the Council and representatives of foreign states and international organizations, as well as the establishment in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip of representative offices other than those described in subparagraph 5.a above, for the purpose of implementing the agreements referred to in subparagraph 5.b, shall not be considered foreign relations."



or wished to accept donor assistance, the PLO had to sign on the PNA's behalf.²³

Despite the prohibitions contained in the interim agreement, the 2002 PNA Basic Law, the first quasi-constitution of the PNA, gave the president power over the selection of diplomats and the acceptance of credentials from foreign delegations.²⁴ This might have been controversial except for the fact that the PLO chair at the time, Yasser Arafat, was also the PNA president. In addition, to avoid any appearance that it was running afoul of Oslo II, the PNA established the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC). For all intents and purposes, MoPIC operated like a foreign ministry working in parallel with the PLO Political Bureau. At meetings in foreign capitals, it was not unusual to have the heads of both PLO and PNA bodies representing Palestinian interests. Donor countries dealt

with the PNA on the specifics of any development projects while the PLO signed the bilateral agreements.

Over time, tension developed between the PLO and PNA. According to Hanan Ashrawi, member of the PLO executive committee, “[a]fter the PLO came to the West Bank and Gaza to live under occupation, the [PNA] gained more and more authority because it became the financial address. And the PLO gradually weakened, diminished, and became what we call a line item in the budget of the [PNA] rather than the overall decision-maker.”²⁵ She notes that the PNA’s “ministries began to encroach on [PLO departmental mandates]” with the tacit approval of the donor community. Ultimately, the PLO National Fund “found itself emptying out as the ‘liberation tax’ was no longer levied or transferred by the Arab governments, and all donations were earmarked for specific projects within the peacemaking agenda.”²⁶

23 See Article IX, Section 5(b), of the Oslo II Interim Agreement: “Notwithstanding the provisions of this paragraph, the PLO may conduct negotiations and sign agreements with states or international organizations for the benefit of the Council in the following cases only: / 1. economic agreements, as specifically provided in Annex V of this Agreement; / 2: agreements with donor countries for the purpose of implementing arrangements for the provision of assistance to the Council; / 3: agreements for the purpose of implementing the regional development plans detailed in Annex IV of the DOP or in agreements entered into in the framework of the multilateral negotiations; and / 4: cultural, scientific and educational agreements.”

24 See [Article 56](#), 2002 Basic Law of the PNA.

25 “Interview with Hanan Ashrawi: Oslo, the PA, and Reinventing the PLO,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 44, 1, (2014): 84.

26 Ashrawi, *Case for Democracy*, 23.

What prevented the PLO status and competencies from completely being overtaken by the PNA and its ministries was the fact that the chair of the PLO was also the president of the PNA.

In 2003, under pressure domestically, but more critically from the US and Israel,²⁷ the Palestinian Legislative Council amended the PNA Basic Law to create an office of the prime minister. The executive branch was reorganized to strip certain powers from Arafat, the PNA president, who had raised the ire of the George W. Bush administration for attacks against Israelis during the 2nd Intifada. Prior to the changes,²⁸ a unitary executive existed with the PNA president as the head of government. The 2003 amendments, however,

The premium placed on modeling the attributes of an independent state came at the cost of PLO pillars of unity, mobilization, and liberation.

established a dual-executive in which power was shared between the PNA's president and its prime minister. This might have threatened PLO supremacy over the PNA except for the fact that the president of the PNA was made responsible for the appointment and dismissal of the prime minister,²⁹ and retained authority over the appointment of diplomats and the credentialing of foreign delegations.³⁰

27 The US had threatened to cut off US aid to the Palestinians and Israel was withholding clearance revenues to the PNA. Therefore, the Palestinian Legislative Council amended the Basic Law to allow for a prime minister that could check the power of the president, in effect, creating a dual-executive authority. Sanaa Alsarghali, "An Unconstitutional Hangover? An Analysis of the Current Palestinian Basic Law in Light of Palestine's Constitutional Heritage," *University of Illinois Law Review* (2017): 518.

28 The Palestinian Legislative Council passed the Basic Law in 1997, with the executive power within Yasser Arafat's multiple offices as president of the PNA and chair of the PLO reigning supreme over the legislative branch. Despite his definitive authority, Arafat did not promulgate the Basic Law until 2002; Asem Khalil, "Beyond the Written Constitution: Constitutional Crisis of, and the Institutional Deadlock in, the Palestinian Political System as Entrenched in the Basic Law," *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 11, 1 (2013): 40. It is important to note that under Article 3 of Oslo II, the Basic Law could not contradict the provisions of the agreement, so the Basic Law had to be drafted to ensure the PLO's exclusive competency over matters of foreign affairs.

29 Article 45, 2003 Amended Basic Law. For background on the constitutional process, see, Alsarghali, "An Unconstitutional Hangover?" and Khalil, "Beyond the Written Constitution."

30 Article 40, PNA Basic Law (amended 2003). It is important to note that the preamble of the Basic Law repeatedly notes that it is an interim document and that the "enactment and ratification" of the law "springs from the fact that" that the PLO is the "sole and legitimate representative of the Arab Palestinian people."

31 Article 2, Diplomatic Corps Law, passed in 2005.

32 The Diplomatic Corps Law contains this heading: "Palestine Liberation Organization/Palestine National Authority/The President." It then prefaces the law with the following: "We, the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and President of the Palestine National Authority, / Having reviewed Article (41) of the amended Basic Law of 2003 and its amendments, / Based on the endorsement made by the Legislative Council in its session convened on August 25, 2005, / In exercise of the powers vested in us, and / In realization of public interest, / Hereby, / Promulgate the following Law."

The Abbas Era: Restructuring the Corps

With the election of Mahmoud Abbas as president in 2005, any trepidations about violating Oslo II prohibitions regarding the PNA conducting foreign relations were cast aside. The competencies of MoPIC were transferred to a newly-created PNA Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). However, the PLO retained ultimate authority over the functioning of the ministry and international diplomacy in a number of important ways. First, only the PNA president, also sitting as PLO chair, may open or close a PLO office abroad.³¹ Second, because the prime minister is the president's political appointee who serves at his pleasure, the president/PLO chair wields influence over the selection of cabinet members, including that of foreign minister. Third, as noted above, only the president/PLO chair, rather than the minister of foreign affairs or the prime minister, is officially responsible for appointing and terminating diplomats. Fourth, all laws, including those affecting the conduct of foreign relations, are promulgated by the president or must be passed by a supermajority. Obtaining a supermajority to force the president's hand would be difficult to obtain without the president's party – also the ruling party in the PLO – breaking ranks.

As a final backstop in the event the PNA president and the PLO chair are not the same person, the Diplomatic Corps Law, discussed later in this chapter, specifically provides that promulgation of the law is under the authority of both the chair of the PLO and the president of the PNA,³² and that any PNA regulations implementing the Diplomatic Corps Law must be endorsed by both the president of the PNA

and the chair of the PLO.³³ In this way, any attempt to legislate powers over the conduct of foreign affairs away from the PLO could be stymied. Finally, only the PLO has internationally-recognized and legal authority to sign bilateral agreements and treaties; the PNA Basic Law does not give the executive branch power to sign agreements.

What becomes clear from the division of labor between the PNA and the PLO on matters affecting foreign relations, is that the linchpin to maintaining PLO supremacy lies in the chair of the PLO and the president of the PNA being the same person. In fact, the individual holding the chairmanship of the PLO and the presidency of the PNA have always been the same person. So long as the president is also sitting as PLO chairman, PLO primacy is ensured and the redundant foreign relations structures existing between the PNA and PLO are not in conflict.

This was born out to a degree in March 2006 when Hamas members Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Zahar became prime minister and foreign minister of the PNA, respectively. No challenge to PLO authority over foreign relations was presented because Mahmoud Abbas, as PNA president and chair of the PLO, maintained authority over international relations and diplomatic engagements pursuant to the governing law of the PNA.

Suspending the Activity of the PLO Political Bureau

Following the creation of MoFA in 2005, PNA Foreign Minister Nasser Alkidwa advanced reforms meant to “integrate the performance” of the PLO’s Political Bureau with the PNA Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁴ The preamble of the Diplomatic Corps Law, which Alkidwa championed, provides that nothing within the

new law infringes on the ultimate authority of the PLO over foreign relations. However, the Political Bureau’s operations and competencies were effectively suspended and placed under the direct chairmanship of the PLO, leaving more operational room for the PNA Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Documentation of the effective demise of the PLO Political Bureau is not readily available and, in fact, PLO and PNA officials consulted for this study either did not know that the Political Bureau still existed or were hard-pressed to identify who led the shell department. That it no longer functions is suggested by the fact that following the last PLO Executive Committee elections held in 2018, and in which Mahmoud Abbas was reelected chair and president of the State of Palestine, a reshuffling of portfolios between committee members ensued. Wafa News Agency, which is associated with the PNA and the PLO, listed all the PLO departments and their new executive committee heads but made no mention of the existence of the [Political Bureau](#).³⁵ However, the PLO website does list the Political Bureau among the other PLO departments, although there is [no reference](#) to any executive member leading it. The focus on the professionalization of the ministry and the premium placed on modeling the attributes of an independent state came at the cost of PLO pillars of unity, mobilization, and liberation. Moreover, maintaining decision-making authority so that it could “slide between the PLO and the [PNA]” resulted in vitiating [“institutional mechanisms of accountability.”](#)

Virtually all the responsibilities of the Political Bureau relating to the conduct of foreign relations, including representing Palestine abroad, overseeing the work of the missions, and attending to the interests of and strengthening connections with the diaspora, became PNA-MoFA functions.³⁶ The important tasks of formulating and implementing foreign policy and appointing diplomats³⁷ were left to the PNA president/

33 Article 41, Diplomatic Corps Law: “Until the State of Palestine exercises its sovereignty, the President of the National Authority and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization shall endorse all decisions of the President stipulated herein.”

34 See Preamble, Diplomatic Corps Law, 2005.

35 Miftah, an NGO headed by PLO Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi, produced a [factsheet on the 2018 PLO elections](#) which also does not list the Political Bureau as existing within the PLO structure.

36 The management of missions and staff abroad is set out in 2005 Diplomatic Corps Law, and in the 2005 Executive Regulations, No. 13, Council Decision 374.

37 [Article 40](#), 2003, Amended Basic Law of the PNA. See also Article 7, Diplomatic Corps Law 2005: “The Ambassador, his designation, transfer and reassignment to the Headquarters shall be decided by the President upon the recommendation of the Minister.”

PLO chairman.³⁸ Despite the shift in the conduct of foreign relations to the PNA, which [financed embassies abroad](#), embassies and missions are all deemed PLO offices and are intended to receive funding from the Palestine National Fund.³⁹ And yet, as Hanan Ashrawi notes, “[w]e have an administration in the PLO that is next to powerless because it has become only a duplicate of the [PNA], instead of being the main address to go to when dealing with Palestinians wherever they may be.”⁴⁰

Additional PLO Bodies with Foreign Affairs/ Diaspora Capacities

There are currently at least six departments of the PLO with duties that include foreign relations, or that share in the work of advancing diaspora interests and expatriate affairs. Those relevant to this study include the Political Bureau (effectively under the chair of the PLO), Negotiations Affairs, Diplomacy and Public Policy, International Relations, Expatriate Affairs, and Refugee Affairs. From time to time, the chair of the PLO and president of the PNA may also establish ad hoc bodies, or call on the Fatah International Relations Commission to conduct foreign relations, or engage with the diaspora and civil society abroad.⁴¹ The table in Annex 3 sets out those who had responsibilities for foreign affairs at different times, although many of the departments were inactive for some periods as there were no PNC meetings to redistribute and reassign files.

The responsibilities of the largely defunct PLO Political Bureau include representing the organization before international bodies, taking care of the interests of the Palestinian diaspora, and concluding [international agreements and treaties](#) – all duties that the PNA foreign ministry ascribes to itself with the notable exception of concluding [international agreements](#). The department is

also responsible for implementing the political program of the PLO.

The Negotiations Affairs Department (NAD) is responsible for following up on implementation of agreements. More broadly, the office is engaged in international diplomacy related to PLO negotiating positions, including with respect to refugee rights and diaspora claims. The head of the office frequently accompanies the chair of the PLO abroad.

The departments of [Diplomacy and Public Policy](#) (DPPD) and International Relations both engage with civil society actors at various levels on the PLO political platform. The DPPD also provides messaging and talking points directly to PLO offices abroad towards advancing the PLO political program of a two-state solution, and advocacy around respect for Palestinian rights and sovereignty.

The Expatriate Affairs (EAD) and [Refugee Affairs](#) (RAD) departments both serve diaspora communities. The EAD engages with Palestinians in countries outside of the areas of operation of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). RAD serves Palestinians where UNRWA operates, including in the OPT, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The EAD and RAD coordinate their work.

Because of PLO/PNA redundancy with respect to foreign relations competencies, when the representatives of PLO departments, ad hoc committees, or the Fatah International Relations Commission are sent abroad, it may be unclear which entity, the PLO or the PNA, is coordinating the mission. On occasion, PLO official travel may be coordinated by the specific PLO departments directly with the relevant embassies and missions without involvement of the PNA-MoFA.

³⁸ Article 3, Diplomatic Corps Law, 2005.

³⁹ See diagram of PLO Bodies, available on the [PLO website](#).

⁴⁰ “Interview with Hanan Ashrawi,” 2014, 85.

⁴¹ See table in Annex 3.



CHAPTER 3:

THE FUNCTIONING OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

To understand the dynamics and challenges of the diplomatic corps, it is important to understand how the representative offices are funded, how appointments and staffing decisions are made, who manages operations, and how portfolios are distributed to offices. This chapter draws on interviews with various missions, as well as present and former diplomats and MoFA staff, and with diaspora Palestinians.

Overall, the interviews reveal a gap between those who still consider themselves PLO representatives charged with representation and liberation, and newer appointees who function more like bureaucrats. There was also confusion about the way in which appointments were made and a sense that favoritism (*wasta*) sometimes

came into play. The missions also faced the difficulties of dealing with the Fatah-Hamas split, and the human rights violations stemming from security coordination with Israel. Most importantly, many felt they lacked political direction from Ramallah due to being trapped in the Oslo framework, even as Israel was relentlessly colonizing the land and destroying the statehood project.

Resourcing the Corps

The source of funding for Palestine's diplomatic corps is intended to be the Palestine National Fund, the PLO's sovereign fund, which is currently under the [supervision](#)

[of the PLO chairman](#). In pre-Oslo days, when PLO members faced visa restrictions in certain countries, the missions depended on the diaspora for their staffing, as well as to cover their costs. Even after MoFA was established and appointments began to be made from Ramallah, some missions still relied on the diaspora for part of their resources. Contrary to reports, the Fund still exists and is funded according to a reliable source; a few ambassadors who used to be PLO staff get paid from the Fund, while the rest get paid by the Ministry of Finance.

The best resourced missions are in general the ones that deal with multilateral affairs at the UN, the EU or the Hague, or are based in a major country capital. A mission's numbers can quickly expand to respond to specific needs; for example, Palestine's chairmanship of the G77 (group of developing countries) at the UN in New York in 2018, or at the Hague to handle the International Criminal Court file. In the year before its closure in 2018, the mission in Washington, DC, was quickly expanded and resourced to engage with the incoming Trump administration.

On the other hand, some missions are bloated well beyond their needs and host diplomats well past retirement age. This is in part due to personal connections, but in other cases it is reportedly due to the need to find homes for PLO members who sacrificed for the cause but were not allowed back into Palestine. Some missions are large due to the extensive protocol duties and consular services they have to provide, such as the mission in Amman.

Staffing: Activists vs. Civil Servants

As noted above, the PNA president hires and fires diplomats, while staff are hired and promoted by the PNA Foreign Minister.⁴² MoFA has a clear staffing chart for each embassy but it is not necessarily reflected in the actual situation on the ground. While some diplomats consider themselves PNA diplomats, others have clear allegiance to the PLO. According to interviewees, when

MoFA began to take over the functions of the PLO Political Bureau after 2005, differences arose between the diplomats and staff who were from the revolutionary and activist period versus those civil servants and bureaucrats who received their commissions from the PNA.

The interviews revealed a lack of clarity amongst the corps as to how diplomats are appointed. A nominations committee that includes the president's office, the Palestinian National Fund, and MoFA reportedly makes the final decision. In the past, there was little training and many of the diplomats developed skills while on the job, emulating more established diplomats. However, this is changing among younger diplomats who are receiving more structured training.

The shrinking space for Palestinian rights advocacy due in large part to the conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism is having an impact on Palestinian diplomacy.

In recent years, MoFA has been seen as a prestigious place to work, and the PLO and Fatah elite are said to be keen to place their sons and daughters there. Some managers have complained that this practice complicates their task, as personal connections enable staff to bypass their decisions. What is clear is that, as in other bureaucracies around the world, a bad high-level appointment can make or break a mission. Some missions in countries key to the Palestinian cause have gone from a high degree of effectiveness to bitter infighting, almost disappearing from the scene. While there are a number of effective missions, there are also some where the head diplomats simply treat the posting as a sinecure.

⁴² See [Article 56](#), 2002 Basic Law of the PNA. See also the 2005 Diplomatic Corps Law and the 2005 Executive Regulations, No. 13, Council Decision 374, which set out the regulations for the management of missions and staff abroad.

Palestinian Representation Abroad: Successes and Challenges

Unlike traditional embassies and missions, the diplomatic corps is supposed to advance the PLO political program in support of the two-state solution, as well as to serve as the sole representative of the Palestinian people wherever they are. However, as discussed above, the devolution of most PLO responsibilities to the PNA, including oversight and management of diplomatic missions, has meant that the missions look more like those of a proto-state, with sections for cultural exchange, trade relations, and consular affairs, rather than those that might support a liberation movement.

A successful Palestinian mission is perceived as one that is able to both increase the value of bilateral relations in the country of posting, and strengthen its commitment to Palestinian sovereignty and rights. For example, according to one diplomat, their missions set up regular meetings between Palestinian ministers and their counterparts, as well as with parliamentary committees on a systematic basis. In addition to tackling policy issues in foreign affairs, such meetings also covered education, agriculture, and trade, among other spheres. The goal, as this diplomat put it, “was to empower our counterparts on the question of Palestine, to let them do their job, but to give them the tools and content to do it better.” This diplomat was able to do this work because they knew the right interlocutors in Ramallah to call, a line of communication that might not be available to other diplomats.

Among the challenges faced by diplomats, the division between Fatah and Hamas looms large. This has, among other problems, reportedly created unwanted opportunities for outside parties such as the UN to get involved “on behalf of” the Palestinians. Another issue is the lack of direction from Ramallah in some cases, as well as tendency to micromanage in others. The diplomats also struggle to address the PNA’s recorded human rights violations, which has been greatly detrimental to the broader cause. In addition, there is a feeling among diplomats that their capacities have been overstretched, in particular given new treaty obligations after the 2012 bid for statehood.

Another major challenge facing Palestinian diplomats is to monitor the role played by Israel in the country both at the official and community level. That is, Israeli diplomats constantly try to upgrade their relations while undermining those of the Palestinians. The shrinking space for Palestinian rights advocacy due in large part to the conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism is having an impact on Palestinian diplomacy. In some countries, it is increasingly difficult for the diplomats to do their job because they are cold-shouldered by the country government for fear of being seen as anti-Israel, even in countries that are committed to upholding the main UN resolutions on Palestinian rights.



The PLO/PNA’s continued adherence to the Oslo framework and the failure of national reconciliation pose major challenges to all advocates of Palestinian rights, including Palestinian civil society, the Palestine solidarity movement, and Palestinian diplomats. With Israel (the PLO’s purported negotiating partner) rapidly entrenching and consolidating its control over the West Bank, including East Jerusalem ([formally annexed in 1980](#)), and with Israel maintaining its tight siege on

Gaza, the PLO's political program based as it is on a two-state solution has been called into question. The split between the PLO's ruling party, Fatah, and the Islamist party Hamas, contributes to the lack of a unified strategy and message that inhibits greater mobilization and coordination among the diaspora, and between the diaspora and the mission.

“The core of the problem remains the lack of political direction, of leadership, and of any vision or strategy. There is only so much the missions abroad can do, considering the central leadership has no credibility or plan.”

The lack of movement on Palestinian rights also contributes to the perception in the diaspora that diplomats and the PLO/PNA are out of touch with the Palestinian people and have no vision. In reality, diplomats, like the Palestinian people, express frustration with the current state of affairs and lament the lack of strategy to deal with the challenges facing the national movement that were set out in Chapter 2. The one notable exception when the diaspora and the missions felt a sense of shared purpose and common strategy was during Palestine's bid to become a member state of the UN, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. A former senior diplomat summed it up: “The core of the problem remains the lack of political direction, of leadership and of any vision or strategy. There is only so much the missions abroad can do, considering the central leadership has no credibility or plan.”

Relations with the Diaspora: More Consular than Political

In countries with Palestinian diaspora populations, embassies and missions have generally designated staff responsible for community relations and outreach. When the diaspora engages with PLO embassies and missions, it is likely to concern consular matters (such as certifying marriages, births and deaths, or authenticating documents), or when they experience

some difficulty with the host country. At the same time, depending on the diplomat's credibility with the Palestinian community as well as her/his willingness to be proactive, the diaspora may engage on matters impacting their national rights or representation within the PLO. The diaspora may also reach out to the missions and invite the ambassador to speak at events, or the diplomats may seek out engagements with community groups and leading local activists to build relations with the community.

As discussed previously, the Oslo Accords adversely impacted the relationship between the diaspora and the PLO and its representatives (see also Chapter 5). Many diaspora Palestinians do not have a clear sense of the work of the PLO's mission, and tend to dismiss the entire corps because of their disappointment in and frustration with the failure of the national project, lack of effective leadership, prolonged rule by diktat in the homeland, and lack of communication and engagement with communities abroad.

The schism between Fatah and Hamas has of course been reflected in the diaspora. Hamas and other Islamist groups are largely alienated from the official missions by virtue of the fact that Hamas is not a member of the PLO and that many mission heads are close to Fatah. In countries where they are able to do so, the Islamist groups have their own community or civil society organizations. In one European country for instance, there are three Palestinian community associations, one supported by Fatah, one by the Fatah break-away group headed by Mohammad Dahlan, and one by Hamas.

The issues raised in this chapter are intended to provide some background to the discussion of the three issues selected for more in-depth analysis in Chapter 4. It is worth concluding this section with a reflection from a seasoned diplomat: “For sure the parallel system between the PLO and the [PNA] does not work well, but it is possible to deal with them as different parts of the same body. The [PNA] provides education, healthcare, and other services, and the PLO undertakes the political part, the advocacy, and the protection of rights. But what we need is more leadership and strategy.”



CHAPTER 4:

THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS' ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DIASPORA

In order to study the extent of the diplomatic corps' engagement with the diaspora, as well as its ability to represent the Palestinian national project, we selected three events that have marked the recent political history of the PLO/PNA. The first was an initiative fully planned and executed by the PLO at the international level, the "statehood bid" of 2010 to 2012 that resulted in upgrading Palestine's status at the UN from observer to non-member state. The second was the Palestinian response to the major external threat posed by US president Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2017, in violation of international law. And the third dealt with an internal challenge, the state of the PLO's representativeness of the Palestinian people as displayed by the PNC elections

in 2018 – elections that were held despite the growing disaffection with the PLO/PNA leadership due to its treatment of Gaza, the unresolved Fatah-Hamas split, and the persistent effort to cling to the Oslo Accords and negotiations despite their failure to secure Palestinian rights.

We interviewed Palestinian diplomats and former diplomats, as well as members of the Palestinian diaspora and representatives of solidarity groups in each of the eight countries selected for our study. Based on our findings, the statehood bid showed how effective the PLO could be when the corps and the diaspora worked together toward the same ends, with clear instructions and messaging. As for the US decision to move its

embassy to Jerusalem, the limited information we were able to collect about the response of the PLO, diaspora, and solidarity groups to this threat suggests that the issue was dealt with as a matter for the state system. Finally, the detailed responses we gathered about the PNC election process in 2018 indicated how broken the system of Palestinian representation had become.

The Statehood Bid: PLO-Diaspora Engagement for National Objectives

While Palestinians might disagree about the value-added of the statehood bid, it was clearly a successfully orchestrated diplomatic endeavor that also engaged the diaspora. Within the PLO and PNA, the bid was understood as an initiative to establish wide international political recognition for the State of Palestine on land occupied by Israel after June 5, 1967. Some of those involved dated the effort as early as the 1988 PNC resolution declaring Palestine's independence. Others ascribed it to the [1999 Berlin Declaration](#) of the European Council which spoke of the "option" of a Palestinian state as part of the final status talks. Still others asserted that it began as a fallback initiative in case the 2007-2008 Annapolis Conference failed to conclude with an agreement on final status issues.

The period examined in this study encompassed the two years between the fall of 2010 and the fall of 2012, beginning with the end of the Obama administration's failed attempt to re-start Palestinian-Israeli direct talks, and ending with the General Assembly's recognition of Palestine as a non-member state of the UN. It was in 2010 that the "Palestine-194" campaign went into full swing as a PLO initiative to secure the State of Palestine as the 194th member state of the UN, and to obtain additional bilateral recognition of Palestine with those states that had yet to do so. The underlying aim was two-fold: to advance the PLO's negotiating position vis-a-vis Israel in peace talks by preserving international consensus around the 1967 Green Line, and as a prerequisite to accessing certain international mechanisms for Israeli accountability, including at the ICC for Palestinian victims of Israeli war crimes. The

State of Palestine had already [submitted a declaration](#) in 2009 accepting ICC jurisdiction.

The height of the PLO's efforts came when Mahmoud Abbas [submitted an application](#) for Palestine to join the UN as a full member on September 23, 2011, during the opening of the UN General Assembly. Admission required a [favorable recommendation](#) to the General Assembly from the Security Council, where the US holds veto power. Anticipating that the US would thwart such a recommendation, the PLO prepared a fallback strategy to build support for a General Assembly resolution upgrading Palestine's status at the UN from an entity to a non-member observer state.

"No one thought a UN vote would liberate Palestine, but at least we started thinking in a direction that would move them away from the Oslo process."

While deliberations were ongoing in the Council's Admissions Committee, the PLO sought entry to other specialized agencies of the UN, including UNESCO.⁴³ That body presented an important test for the level of support for Palestine's statehood initiative as admission required a two-third majority vote at the General Conference made up of 195 countries, including those western European countries that were important trading partners for Israel, and that had yet to extend bilateral recognition to Palestine. Not only would a favorable vote at UNESCO put pressure on states deliberating Palestinian statehood in the Security Council Admissions Committee, it could also provide important evidence to the ICC that Palestine was a state for purposes of the Court, assuming jurisdiction over war crimes allegations committed by Israeli individuals in the OPT. Only states may accept ICC jurisdiction under the body's governing law, the Rome Statute.⁴⁴

UNESCO's General Conference [voted to admit Palestine](#) on October 31, 2011, with 107 in favor, 14 against, and

⁴³ In addition, despite opposing views by some of the diverse PLO and Fatah bodies dealing with foreign affairs, MoFA put the issue of Palestinian statehood on the agenda of the meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in May 2011, where it garnered majority support.

⁴⁴ [Article 12 \(2\) & \(3\)](#), Rome Statute (referring to "States" for purposes of accepting ICC jurisdiction).

52 abstentions. According to [one advisor](#) to PNA President Mahmoud Abbas, the vote was not only “a historic moment ... en route to full recognition of Palestinian independence and self-determination,” it was also “a foundation stone” for efforts at the Security Council and other international organizations, and “a manifestation of ability of the international community to defy occupation and practically work towards ending it.”

Less than two weeks later, the UN Security Council Admissions Committee [failed to recommend](#) that Palestine be admitted to the UN as a full member state. Rather than force a vote in the Council which would have been futile, the PLO/PNA [redoubled its efforts](#) in preparation for a UN General Assembly resolution recognizing Palestine on the pre-June 5, 1967 Green Line, and upgrading its status at the UN from observer entity to a non-member observer state. Efforts were buoyed by the prosecutor at the ICC who decided in 2012 that he did not have the competency to decide whether Palestine was a state for purposes of establishing ICC jurisdiction. Instead, he signaled that the UN General Assembly was the [proper body](#) for that determination. The General Assembly spoke on November 29, 2012, the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, by admitting Palestine as an observer state.⁴⁵

The bid to upgrade Palestine to non-member state status is seen by many from within as the leading example of the entire PLO/PNA diplomatic system working together closely and effectively. A single PLO committee led the efforts and worked to pull together the different actors at headquarters. This centralized activity allowed for clear communication and division of labor.⁴⁶ As one advisor involved put it, there was “deep coordination between a number of bodies and a mix of experience and youth, as well as of diplomats, legal advisors, communicators, and of those who had grown up in Palestine, and those that had returned from the diaspora.” Another diplomat recalled: “There was full coordination between Ramallah

and the mission in New York, which took the lead, as well as in Washington. The resistance to the move by [Israeli prime minister Benjamin] Netanyahu at the time and to this day is a sign that this was a powerful move.”

From the perspective of the PLO/PNA and the diplomatic corps, every step taken to formalize recognition of Palestine as a state was a source of power for the Palestinian people. As a diplomat closely involved in the process explained: “We had to be creative and find new ways to respond to the evolving negative realities – the extreme right wing government in Israel, the strength of the settlement movement, and the emergence of regimes that were moving away from established global policy. With these diplomatic moves, we were able to create legal reality and remain at the center of the international agenda against efforts to ignore and isolate us internationally.”

The [statehood resolution](#) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 29 November 2012.⁴⁷ The drafters of the resolution took care to ensure that the operative section protected the overarching role of the PLO in paragraph 2 so that the organization remained the sole representative of the Palestinian people. However, only the [resolution’s preambular language](#) explicitly referenced the right of Palestinian refugees under UN General Assembly Resolution 194. When asked why refugee rights were not included in the operable sections, Palestinian diplomats explained that the resolution was focused on enhancing Palestine’s state status but they insisted that the right of refugees was protected by the language used. For Palestinian refugees and the diaspora, however, this had been a source of concern since the Oslo Accords.

Although the PLO bid to upgrade Palestine’s status at the UN was primarily a diplomatic move, there was some valuable interaction between the officials and diplomats with the Palestinian diaspora.⁴⁸ For

45 [General Assembly Resolution 67/19](#), UN Doc. A/RES/67/19 (November 29, 2012), with 138 in favor to 9 against (Canada, Czech Republic, Israel, Marshall Islands, Micronesia – Federated States of, Nauru, Panama, Palau, United States), and 41 abstentions. See also, Report of the UN Secretary General on the [Status of Palestine in the UN](#).

46 Another example of the diplomatic system coming together was the successful vote for Palestine’s membership of INTERPOL. “The Israelis were sure we would fail,” said a senior Ramallah-based diplomat, “but we deployed diplomatic efforts from all parts of the system and it worked.”

47 [GA Resolution 67/19](#) (29 November 2012). See operative paragraph 5, which provides only that the refugee issue is a matter to be resolved in final status negotiations.

48 The locations of the interviewees for this section have not been identified in order to comply with our commitment to keeping comments off the record. However, we can note that their locations ranged from Europe to North and South America.

example, a Palestinian diaspora leader of a major civil society organization felt that there had been “a bit more synthesis between the mission and the community despite differences of opinion on the broader vision” because the statehood bid was seen as “using a strategy of confrontation to achieve Palestinian rights.” As this leader explained, “one of the most frustrating things for me and many others is the apparent inability of the leadership to visualize a strategy where Palestinian rights are delivered beyond a framework of negotiations through Washington, DC. The statehood bid was a shift from the past. The PLO put some good faith and a greater degree of cooperation and messaging in that moment. No one thought a UN vote would liberate Palestine, but at least we started thinking in a direction that would move them away from the Oslo process.” The head of a solidarity organization in a different country also noted that there was closer cooperation with the mission at the time and much more media coverage than on other efforts.

However, in another country, an active Palestinian community leader could recall no outreach related to the statehood bid in 2012, even though the community was strong and well-organized, and had been closely engaged in various initiatives in previous years. They said that the mission’s good coordination with the community had changed with the appointment of a new ambassador. The head of yet another solidarity organization pointed out that some years later, as part of an effort to secure recognition of Palestinian statehood in a European capital, the mission did some lobbying but did not engage with solidarity groups, instead focusing on allies who already supported them.

Despite the uneven nature of PLO-diaspora engagement, the experience of the statehood bid shows the potential for mobilization and joint action by the PLO missions and the diaspora. However, the statehood bid also shows the importance of having committed, creative diplomats leading the missions, and reveals the way things can

slide from an effective mission-diaspora-civil society engagement to a breakdown in effective collaboration.

Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem

The Trump administration’s 6 December 2017 announcement recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and the move of the US embassy on 14 May 2018, presented an important challenge to the Palestinian diplomatic corps. The international response to the reversal of long-standing stated US policy would be a harbinger for the continued relevance of international law in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and of international consensus around the two-state solution.

Immediately after the Trump administration’s statement, Palestinian missions mobilized member states to reaffirm the international legal framework. The directions from the president’s office in Ramallah were to “mobilize strongly,” leaving the methods and details to the missions to decide. A letter was sent to the UN Security Council on 6 December 2017 drawing attention to past UNSC resolutions and the established order. On 18 December, the [UNSC voted 14 to 1](#) (with the US using its veto) on the resolution submitted by Egypt, which declared that any actions to change the status of Jerusalem were null and void, and should be rescinded. After the US veto, Palestine and its supporters at the UN [submitted the resolution](#) at an emergency session of the General Assembly, where it passed with 128 in favor, nine against, and 35 abstentions.

Despite the efforts by the missions with member states, there appeared to be little engagement between the missions and the diaspora on the embassy move. Our interviews showed that, by 2018, many Palestinians in the diaspora were largely alienated from the missions when it came to PLO initiatives, either for political reasons, or for what they saw as major ineffectiveness.⁴⁹ The PLO and PNA appear to have treated the embassy move as something to be dealt with at the state level, missing an opportunity to work in tandem with the diaspora and solidarity movement to amplify Palestinian

⁴⁹ It is important to note that one reason for lack of engagement may be that US citizens are required to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act before engaging in advocacy on behalf of foreign entities or governments. Therefore, when there was a PLO representative office in Washington, DC, members of the diaspora had to be careful not to be seen lobbying on behalf of the mission. In addition, federal terrorism legislation referencing the PLO prevents Americans from providing material support to the organization.



STATE OF PALESTINE

voices and increase the pressure for Palestinian rights. The diaspora and civil society did protest the move in several countries, but, as a leading Palestinian advocate put it, the Palestinian community in that country felt its efforts were not as impactful as they could have been because of what they saw as the ineffectiveness of the mission.

The Issues Raised by the 2018 PNC Elections

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the PNC was vital to developing and nurturing the Palestinian people's sense of unity, and it provided them with a vision and goal. According to the PLO Basic Law, the Palestinian people elect members to the PNC [by direct ballot](#). However, because direct elections are not possible, selection of PNC members has been based on a quota system that [allocates seats proportionately](#) to various Palestinian constituencies such as political parties, trade unions and syndicates, identifiable geographic locations with diaspora communities,⁵⁰ independents, returnees, the Palestinian Legislative Council, the military, and youth.⁵¹ Although the system of representation was not perfect, it functioned well enough to maintain a certain level of cohesion and credibility.

The PLO's shift, beginning in 1974, from the national goal of a single democratic state in all of Mandate

Palestine to a sovereign state in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967 as part of the Oslo Accords, raised alarms among refugees and the diaspora because it signaled to them that return and restitution were no longer centered by the political platform of the organization. The failure to regularly convene the PNC over the past two decades, and the perceived foot-dragging in bringing Hamas and other Palestinian factions under the PLO umbrella despite promises made in the Cairo Declaration of 2005, fuels popular diaspora discontent with the PLO.

On 30 April 2018, the PLO National Council, the organization's legislative body, convened after more than two decades in abeyance in order to conduct elections.⁵² In the preparation for the elections, each constituency was supposed to be tasked with selecting its own representatives to the body. In the case of diaspora communities, the PNA MoFA has [no mandated role](#) in the selection process. Nevertheless, our interviews with diaspora activists, diplomats, and mission staff regarding the convening of the 2018 PNC confirmed that PLO missions and diplomats were involved in the process of selecting or electing representatives. Missions engaged in preparatory work, including confirming any deaths of PNC members and updating lists accordingly, as well as reaching out to living PNC members to inform them of the convening of the PNC. One diplomat explained that once a person was selected, there was no process under the PLO Basic Law to "unmember" him or her and so, in one particular Palestinian constituency, new seats were added to allow for "some measure of fairness" in representation. A mission could also be called upon to mediate the election process in the event of any intra-community conflict or "external meddling" so as to help ensure a democratic process.

In one country, a community representative said a "fracture" had developed during the selection process.⁵³ The mission had taken "unilateral moves" so that "there was no democratic representation at all." Those who were nominated were perceived as Fatah loyalists approved by Ramallah. The episode resulted in a sense

50 In March 1977, at the 13th session of the PNC, geographic areas with diaspora populations were allocated seats to the PNC. Nassar, Palestine Liberation Organization, 64. The PNC is authorized by the Basic Law to expand the number of seats to the PNC. See Article 32, PLO Basic Law.

51 See 2018 Miftah factsheet. Note, however, that the Miftah factsheet does not reference representatives of diaspora communities.

52 One extraordinary session was held in 2009 for the purpose of electing Hanan Ashrawi to the Executive Committee of the PLO.

53 The interviewees in this section were conducted in North and South America, Europe, and the Arab region.

of mistrust between the community and the mission in a country where relations had been working well up until then. This was echoed in another country by a Palestinian from a leading organization: “[The mission] did not inform us at all that PNC elections were going to be held. We found out by chance through the media. They nominated a few people themselves, without any consultation, and no elections were held.”

In a third country, where the organizations responsible for selecting new PNC members no longer existed and a number of PNC members had passed away or could not be located, a former diplomat criticized the overall process as “totally ad hoc,” informal, and characterized by a lack of transparency. As this source put it, “PLO interest in the PNC is seasonal. Ultimately, if Abu Mazen and the presidency were not happy, they could pull the plug on the selections.” A Palestinian civil

“There is a total disconnect between the community and the Palestinian mission. . . We have no state to defend us. This is the real meaning of being stateless.”

society activist in yet another country reflected that even when the PLO was in better shape, democracy was always a problem in the PNC nominations and elections. However, by the time of the 2018 PNC, the attempt at elections exposed the extent to which matters have become exacerbated by factional divides within Fatah, and between it and other factions, to the degree that one interviewee stated that “[the PNC] absolutely doesn’t represent the Palestinian people.” Complaints were even made public by Palestinian communities in Latin America, who [published an open letter](#) criticizing the exclusion and lack of democratic process of the PNC elections.

The sense of disarray – indeed, abandonment – is summed up by a Palestinian activist: “There is a total disconnect between the community and the Palestinian mission. We don’t have their backing for our petitions. For the first time, [a committee convened by the host country] wanted to discuss the Palestinian question; several experts were invited but not a single Palestinian. We have no state to defend us. This is the real meaning of being stateless.”

Many members of the diplomatic corps are aware of these issues. As a diplomat put it, the selection logic was partisan: “People did not feel represented by the way the diaspora was solicited. An attempt was made to renew the ‘intermediary bodies’ such as trade unions, but these groups are outdated and are no longer representative.” A former diplomat explained that in the past, there had been a strong relationship and interdependence between the PNC and the popular organizations, such as the general union of students and trade unions, among others, but that this weakened in part because of the emergence of Islamic political groups that grew outside of the umbrella of the PLO. In addition, as the political situation deteriorated, the PLO missions and representatives felt that their credibility was decreasing, isolating them from the rest of the Palestinian people.

Overall, the diaspora’s engagement in the 2018 PNC appears to have reinforced its alienation from the PLO, with even some members of the PLO’s ruling party, Fatah, expressing criticism. While the PNC was never a perfectly democratic institution, it had had a high level of credibility with the Palestinian people. Many Palestinians now see the 1988 PNC, when the declaration of independence was made, as the last truly representative session. After so many years of inactivity, in the view of those diaspora members interviewed, their experience with the 2018 PNC elections only diminished its credibility as a representative body of the Palestinian people.



CHAPTER 5:

THE GROWING ALIENATION OF THE DIASPORA AND SOLIDARITY GROUPS

The interviews conducted for this study provided a good deal of information that went beyond the three events discussed in Chapter 4, and which confirmed the diaspora's alienation from the PLO and the PNA. They also revealed how the growing international movement of solidarity with Palestinian rights, which now largely takes its cue from Palestinian civil society rather than the PLO, tends to steer clear of Palestinian officialdom, although it is acutely aware that the absence of effective representation is detrimental to the organizing of the Palestinian community and, by extension, those in solidarity with it.

As noted earlier, the serious onset of this alienation began with the Oslo Accords in 1993 and worsened over time, exacerbated by the security coordination between the Israeli military and Palestinian security forces, and Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip and, more recently, the PNA's withholding of public sector salaries and subsidization of utilities. As a Palestinian diaspora activist in the Arab region said, "The fact that so many groups in civil society are coming together and finding their space without the PLO at all means the PLO is no longer a space. Before Oslo, they had groups, activities, and so on – there was a lot of strength and faith built into the liberation movement and things just broke with Oslo."

PLO/PNA officials are conscious of the alienation and the need to reverse it. As one official put it, “The diaspora had not been seen as a priority for the PLO. As a result, we lost a ‘superpower;’ we need to seriously re-invest and re-build bridges with the Palestinian communities.” But the road to winning back the diaspora is not an easy one. A diplomat summed up his experience of working with the diaspora as follows: “Most are anti-Oslo, anti-Fatah and anti-PLO, which they see as selling out. Many are pro-Hamas because it is seen as the resistance movement.”

Due to growing Arab normalization with Israel and looming Israeli annexation, the PLO is now forced to consider how to confront the relentless attempts to liquidate the Palestinian national movement and reactivate the important role once played by the diaspora in elevating the organization’s political platform. It is thus worth consolidating the issues raised by diaspora Palestinians and the solidarity movement – as well as the diplomatic corps, many of whom are genuinely self-critical – in order to inform such a review. The issues are clustered in seven areas below:⁵⁴

1. The Conflation of the PLO with the PNA and with Fatah. Fatah still dominates the political system despite its own internal divisions. This is alienating to the many Palestinians in the diaspora who do not belong, nor want to belong to, and/or are critical of, Fatah as part of the problem, thus compounding the lack of representation. In addition, many people, particularly in the solidarity movement, are confused about the existence of two separate bodies and are unclear about the different nature and authorities of the PLO and PNA.
2. The Challenge of Hamas. Hamas was launched over 30 years ago, yet the Islamist resistance has not yet been incorporated into the PLO, even though this was agreed upon at the 2005 reconciliation talks. This is partly due to Fatah’s resistance to being challenged as the paramount leader, but also because of the conditions the international community imposed on dealings with Hamas. Both Hamas and Islamic

Jihad have greatly evolved, now effectively adopting the two-state solution,⁵⁵ and thus making it easier to bring them into the national and international fold (keeping in mind that their participation may change the character of the PLO). If the current reconciliation talks between Fatah, Hamas, and other factions in response to the normalization with Israel by the UAE and Bahrain move forward, this roadblock to unity will have been removed. This would also greatly facilitate cross-party coordination in the diaspora – which has reflected the split at home – and increase the power of Palestinian and solidarity advocacy.

“The PLO is more interested in what the US and EU think than what solidarity activists think. This is a mistake.”

3. The Limits of Representation. Although both the chair of the PLO and the president of the PNA (which have been the same person since the PNA was established) must sign off on regulations relating to the diplomatic corps, the missions receive their direction and mandate from the PNA. However, the PNA only represents the OPT and not the entire Palestinian people, which is alienating to the diaspora. The fact that MoFA encompasses “expatriate affairs” is also seen as marginalizing Palestinian rights, in particular the right of return. “There is already a PLO department for the diaspora,” noted a respondent; “We must be affiliated with the PLO, not the PNA.”
4. Alienation from Leadership Policies. Continuing security coordination with Israel is widely rejected by those interviewed, as is the PLO/PNA’s increasing authoritarianism and corruption. In addition, the policies make it harder for the diaspora and the solidarity movement to send a clear message on Palestinian rights. As one diaspora activist explained, “When we speak to journalists, policy-makers, and

⁵⁴ The interviewees in this section were conducted in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and the Arab region.

⁵⁵ See analysis by Belal Shobaki in [Reclaiming the PLO, Re-engaging Youth](#).

other audiences, our message is one thing and their message is another. For example, when we address the failure of the security-based concept and its dangers, PLO representatives come with the exact opposite message. This enables our interlocutors to delegitimize solidarity voices and define us as radicals when we are simply asking for accountability.”

5. The Lack of Effectiveness of Some Diplomats. This complaint was echoed across the countries covered in this survey; it covered not only inefficiency, but lack of knowledge of the political and local context. One diplomat provided some context, “The effort to combine national liberation with governance was not possible. Nor was the attempt to professionalize the diplomatic corps: we gave the illusion of renewing the generations that built it, but we brought in people cut off from the political reality.” A rights advocate working to change their country’s policies towards the conflict complained of PLO/PNA invisibility by contrast to the Israeli lobby’s active presence. However, as another diplomat pointed out, the disparity in resources available to Israel and to the Palestinians is stark. In their country of posting in Europe, for example, the Palestinian mission had 15 staff (including those handling administrative functions), whereas the Israeli embassy had 50 staff, of whom several had been assigned to attacking the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.
6. An Insufficient Grasp of Power Politics. In both the West and the Arab World, the focus of PLO diplomats is on the government or other diplomats, whereas the actual and potential sources of support are from the people themselves. As one solidarity actor said, “The PLO is more interested in what the US and EU think than what solidarity activists think. This is a mistake.” They added that their country was an important trade partner of Israel’s, and that if they gave up on supporting the Palestinians, then other countries in the region were likely to follow. “The PLO needs to have a serious assessment of the

balance of power before the curtain closes.” Another solidarity actor noted that, given the skewed power balance, building alliances with other movements is vital. “There is never going to be a time when people are not fighting for some rights in [this country]. Intersectionality with these other movements is key. It takes a long time and effort, but it is effective.”

An advocate of Palestinian rights said that at a certain period, much PLO/PNA lobbying was focused on recognition of Palestine rather than on campaigning for the release of the UN database of businesses complicit in Israel’s occupation, which the activist believed would have a more tangible impact.⁵⁶

The PNA, which holds most of the power as opposed to the PLO, views the diaspora as expatriates, rather than as Palestinians with the fundamental right of return.

7. The Lack of Political Direction. Last but not least is the lack of clarity around the national project. Both Fatah and Hamas support the statehood project but neither is able to do more than protect their own sphere of power within a shrinking, encircled, and besieged Palestinian territory. This leaves both Palestinian and solidarity activists fighting for rights without an end goal. As a result, a growing number of Palestinians in the homeland and abroad are calling for a shift to a one-state program that prioritizes human rights.

There is a limit to what Palestinian diplomats can do in this situation given that their role, like that of their counterparts representing sovereign states, is to represent national policy. Some in the solidarity movement remember the “incredible” Palestinian diplomacy in the 1960s and 1970s, which elevated Palestinian rights as a critical issue within the international arena despite other

⁵⁶ A report on business enterprises involved in activities relating to settlements in the OPT was requested by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2016 (Human Rights Council [resolution 31/36](#), adopted on 24 March 2016). It was due to be finalized in March 2017, but there was [intense lobbying](#) against its release, even though it intended to help businesses and their host countries to ensure they were not contributing to human rights abuses. The UN Human Rights Office finally released the report on 12 February 2020.

pressing major global crises. Another noted that the diplomatic corps was disoriented by Oslo: “instead of placing a narrative for the left, they became bureaucrats.”

Despite all the criticism cited above, virtually no one questioned the legitimacy of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. A Palestinian respondent who was invited to a [2017 Palestine Abroad Conference](#) held in Istanbul (and which was criticized by PLO officials as an attempt to undermine the organization) explained: “I didn’t go as it was outside the framework of the PLO,” even though they were heavily critical of the PLO themselves. The dilemma faced not just by the diaspora, but by the entire Palestinian people is that there is no body other than the PLO that still has some representative legitimacy.

The interviews also suggested areas of collaboration. A solidarity representative noted, “We have been way ahead of the PLO in terms of talking about ‘apartheid,’ ‘boycott’ and other areas. The PLO is still sticking to the two-state solution and is determined to keep that framework alive no matter what, while we in civil society have long been pushing to start a discussion of a Plan B. In fact, some diplomats encourage us to speak up, understanding what each of us can push and the role we can respectively play.”

In one case where an incoming representative made a serious attempt to reach out to civil society, setting up

regular monthly meetings, this was much appreciated. However, a civil society representative noted that it had not been a two-way conversation; there had been more emphasis on informing about the mission’s activities than hearing advice and suggestions from civil society. In another case, a diplomat in a new posting organized a meeting with several civil society organizations. Although it was a difficult conversation, the representative has since been invited to speak at a number of civil society events, showing the potential of outreach.

To sum up, the reasons that alienate the bulk of the Palestinian diaspora and the international solidarity movement from the existing PLO/PNA structures include: The dominance of the PLO and PNA by the Fatah party; the fact that the PNA, which holds most of the power as opposed to the PLO, views the diaspora as expatriates, rather than as Palestinians with the fundamental right of return; the specific policies adopted by the PNA, and particularly security coordination with Israel; the ineffectiveness of some diplomats, which leaves the field wide open to well-resourced Israeli diplomats to de-legitimize criticism of Israel; the lack of appreciation of the strength of civil society; and the lack of political direction given the absence of a national project that the Palestinian people and their supporters can rally behind. These are some of the challenges the PLO faces if it is to capitalize on the “superpower” of the diaspora working hand in hand with the solidarity movement.



CHAPTER 6:

RECOMMENDATIONS: REVIVING THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF THE PLO

Despite political divisions and a fragmented Palestinian body politic, much of the Palestinian diaspora is still a potential source of power that offers hope for the future. It is not trapped under the draconian Israeli occupation and siege in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. It is not enduring second-class status and loss of land and rights in the deepening apartheid reality within Israel as well as across the OPT. Overall, the diaspora is still attached to its homeland and to the right of return, and Palestinian organizations and individuals alike continue to contribute to that goal.

As for the PLO diplomatic corps, despite the many problems identified in this study, it still houses hard-

working and dedicated diplomats who are ready and willing to engage. The diaspora has the right and the duty to reach out and seek – indeed, demand – engagement and representation of all Palestinians and their right to return, freedom, and equality. This applies not just to the diaspora that is organized and active in advancing Palestinian rights in their countries of residence. It also applies to the broader mass of Palestinians who are not affiliated to activist or community organizations abroad, but who still respond in moments of crisis and mobilize resources.

Finally, we recognize that this study, as the first of its kind, could not encompass all the research needed

to do justice to the long and difficult – yet storied – history of the diplomatic corps and its engagement with the Palestinian diaspora. We conclude this report by suggesting areas for further research by Palestinians and those who believe in justice for the Palestinian people and other oppressed peoples.

Recommendations to Diaspora Palestinians

1. Diaspora groups and individuals have a responsibility to take the initiative to engage PLO missions and communicate their views and expectations, as well as their disapproval of, specific policies that undermine Palestinian efforts for freedom and justice. As this study has shown, even diaspora members critical of the PLO/PNA can engage during well-planned and implemented initiatives such as the statehood bid. Developing a regular relationship between the diaspora and the respective mission is also vital to ensure that the diaspora has a voice in efforts to rebuild Palestinian institutions, even though, at present, there are limits to what can be achieved absent PLO and PNA structural reforms that allow for authentic participatory democracy.
2. Diaspora representatives and Palestinians active in various civil society organizations in their host country should, to the extent possible and in coordination with civil society within Palestine, assist PLO representatives in addressing some of the core challenges they face by:
 - a. convening forums to discuss the Palestinian national project and how to articulate it;
 - b. helping to facilitate inter-factional rapprochement in a way that is not possible inside the OPT;
 - c. demanding that policies adopted by the PNC are implemented, such as ending security coordination with Israel that entrenches occupation and its annexationist agenda; and
 - d. helping to push back against Israel's campaign to conflate criticism of its occupation, siege, and other rights violations with anti-Semitism.
3. Diaspora representatives should demand that the PLO Executive Committee appoint an

ombudsperson to respond to diaspora concerns and complaints to enable opportunities to communicate feedback regarding the PLO representative office.

4. Diaspora organizations should prioritize community education to allow their members, particularly the youth and new leaders, an opportunity to reconnect with the history of the PLO and the broader political history, appreciate its achievements, and understand the internal and external challenges the organization is facing. The newly-recovered Palestine Research Center, the research repository of the PLO, provides a wellspring of archival materials, studies, and audio-visual resources to support such an endeavor. The Institute for Palestine Studies is also a rich resource. There are, of course, many other resources available, including this [early history of the PLO](#) produced at Oxford University, and told through interviews and personal documents.

Recommendations to the PLO

1. The PLO must drive an initiative to revisit the national project. A renewed vision, backed by serious planning and engagement, is needed to secure Palestinian rights and to help address the challenges facing Palestinians and their movement, including Israel's normalization drive and the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.

Despite political divisions and a fragmented Palestinian body politic, much of the Palestinian diaspora is still a potential source of power that offers hope for the future.

2. The Central Council must review the purposes and functions of the PNA, including its relationship to the PLO Political Bureau, which should reassert its authority over the diplomatic corps. The Council should also review the division of responsibilities between the various PLO departments to limit overlap. As part of the review, an assessment should

be carried out on how prioritization of statehood has impacted the Palestinian struggle for liberation and the work of PLO missions around the world.

3. The PLO should rebuild capacities within its Department of Popular Mobilization, which had once contributed to connecting the diaspora to the work of the organization. The department should develop new strategies to better engage with the diaspora in line with renewed national goals and strategies.

The diaspora has the right and the duty to reach out and seek – indeed, demand – engagement and representation of all Palestinians and their right to return, freedom, and equality.

4. The PLO Executive Committee should create an office of ombudsperson within to enable the diaspora to communicate issues related to the operation of the missions.
5. Until the Political Bureau is reactivated to assume its role in directly managing the diplomatic corps,

MoFA must be vigilant in ensuring that the most qualified persons are appointed at all levels in a process that is transparent.

6. The PLO should redouble efforts to support a national dialogue that allows all political factions and constituencies, including the diaspora, to develop a process for a representative PNC based on transparent and agreed criteria for selection of members to the PNC, and promote consensus-building around a renewed national project.

Areas for Further Research

- Mapping the complexity of the diaspora across national settings, age groups, and professions, amongst other areas; this would support the engagement of the diplomatic corps with specific groupings.
- The role of students in the diaspora, both past and present, incorporating the role of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), and the relationship with the diplomatic corps.
- The effect of bringing Hamas into the PLO and the PNC, given its strengths and alliances. To what extent would it alter the character of the PLO and the diplomatic corps?

ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the study is summarized below:

- a. Concept Note: This was prepared at the start and refined as the team and advisory panel took shape. It broadly set out the premise and goals of the study, the questions to be tackled, the approach to be adopted, the research activities and timeline, and the management of the process.
- b. Selection of Expert Panel and Research Team: The panel and team included former members of the PLO as well as analysts from Al-Shabaka's network.
- c. Literature Review: The review focused on laws, decrees, studies on the PLO, and materials available at the MoFA, in PLO archives, and with respondents.
- d. Selection of Key Events: The research team decided to focus on three specific events within the past decade that would provide an understanding of the diaspora's engagement with the missions. After much debate, the events selected were: the statehood bid between 2011 and 2012, President Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2017, and the PNC elections in 2018. This established the time frame for the study between 2010 and 2018.
- e. Selection of Missions: The missions were selected based on a set of criteria that included the country's influence in global and Palestinian affairs, its position on Palestinian rights, its regional location, the size of the Palestinian community, the type of Palestinian mission (whether embassy, office, or general delegation), and its significance to the three events selected for study. The selection also depended on our ability to identify members of the diaspora and solidarity groups in those countries. The final list was: Brazil (embassy), Chile (embassy), Germany (mission), India (embassy), Jordan (embassy), the United States (mission, closed in 2018), as well as the PLO offices to the United Nations in New York (mission) and the EU (delegation).
- f. Selection of diaspora and solidarity group members: Members of the Palestinian diaspora were selected on the basis of their standing within their communities, as activists known for being well-informed on Palestinian matters both at home and in Palestine, and likely to have experience with the local Palestinian mission. Representatives of solidarity organizations were chosen from established groups and coalitions that were not affiliated with any political party or faction in each of the eight countries.
- g. Semi-structured Interview Protocol: A detailed interview protocol was developed and each interviewee was assured of complete confidentiality; their names and affiliation would be listed in an appendix if they had no objection, but no attributions would be made. There were a number of interviewees who did not want to be listed at all, and the team respected their wishes.

ANNEX 2: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

The interviewees listed below belong to one or more of these groups: the PLO Diplomatic Corps (current and former) as well as advisors to the PLO; the Palestinian diaspora; and/or civil society organizations. Because of the overlap amongst the groups, they are listed by Palestinian diaspora as well as civil society organizations, and by diplomatic corps and advisors. Ten additional interviewees preferred not to be listed.

Palestinian Diaspora and Civil Society Organizations

- Cecilia Baeza – Researcher and instructor at Sciences-Po, Paris
- Hanna Hanania – Family dentist and community activist in Virginia
- Jamil Hilal – Sociologist, analyst, and activist
- Aneta Jerska – Coordinator, European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine ([ECCCP](#))
- Diego Khamis – Lawyer and Secretary General of the Palestinian Club in Chile
- Martin Konecny – Director of the European Middle East Project
- Yousef Munayyer – US-based activist, writer, and political analyst
- Hanna Safieh – Co-founder, COPLAC, and former PNC Central Council member
- Nahed Samour – Lawyer and Islamic studies scholar
- David Wildman – United Methodist Liaison to UN & Middle East

PLO Diplomats (current and retired) and Advisors to the PLO

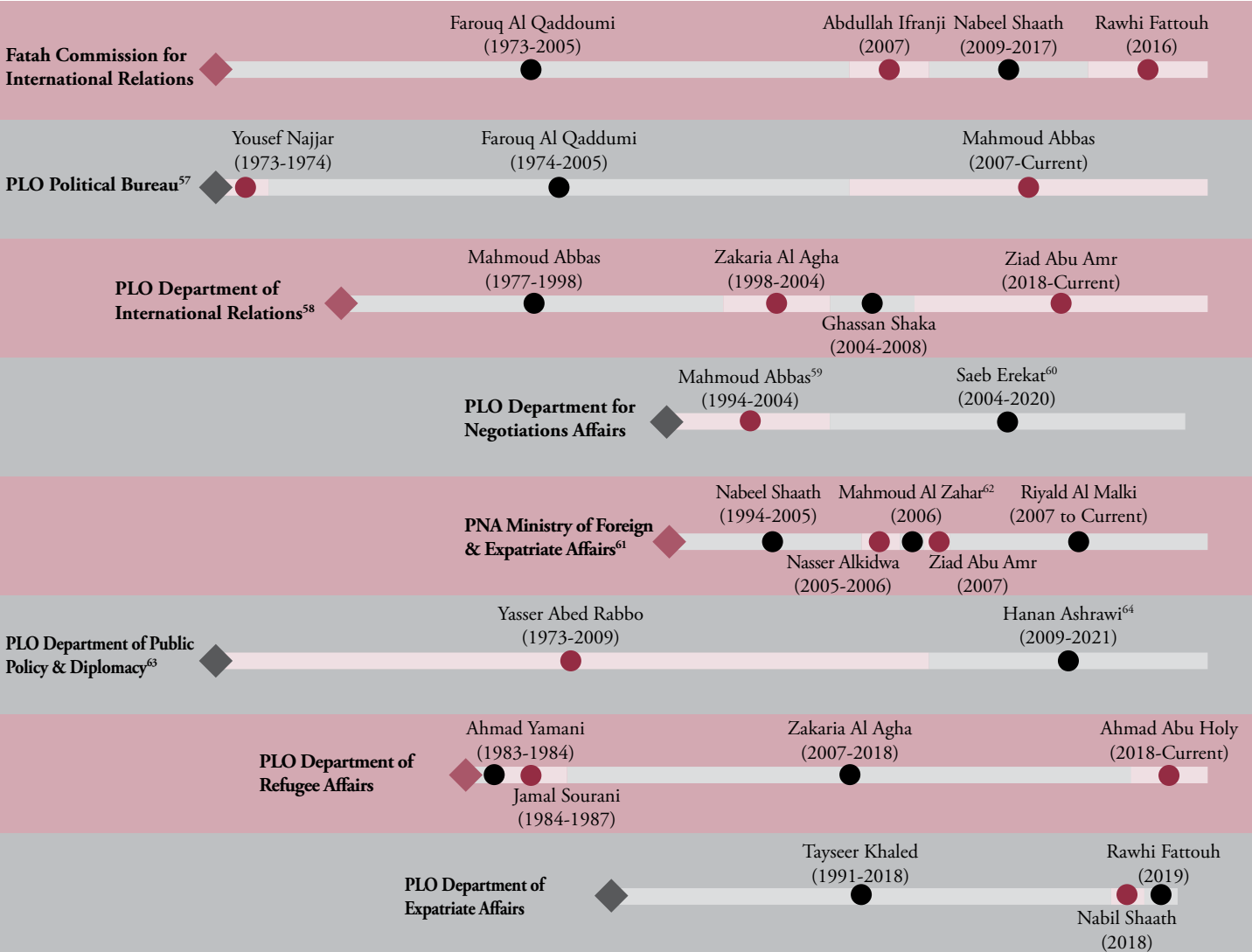
- Nasser Alkidwa – Chair, Yasser Arafat Foundation; former PA Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Hanan Ashrawi – Former member of PLO Executive Committee, academic, and activist
- Hassan Balawi – Palestinian diplomat
- Diana Buttu – Former legal advisor to the PLO
- Nizar Farsakh – Former diplomat and former member of the Palestinian negotiating team
- Sara Husseini – Former advisor to the PLO
- Yara Jalajel – Senior legal researcher, former legal advisor to Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Ambassador Riyadh Mansour – State of Palestine Mission to the United Nations
- Afif Safieh – Retired Palestinian diplomat
- Nabeel Shaath - Foreign Affairs Adviser of the President of Palestine
- Leila Shahid – Former diplomat
- Ambassador Husam Zomlot – Head of the Palestinian Mission to the United Kingdom

ANNEX 3:

MAPPING INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The chart below illustrates the overlapping foreign relations and expatriate/refugee affairs responsibilities between the PLO and PNA, as well as between the various departments of the PLO during different periods in the evolution of the PLO and PNA. The Fatah Commission for International Relations is listed, though it is not a constituent part of the PLO or PNA, because of the prominent role it has played in diplomacy

efforts, at times overlapping with the Fatah-led PLO. Not listed here are the various ad hoc committees established periodically to deal with emergent situations and diplomatic campaigns, such as existed during the PLO's bid for UN membership. Several past and current officials and members of the PLO were consulted in the production of this table. Some of the responses conflicted, or the information was not known.



57. The Political Bureau is the department principally in charge of PLO international relations and diplomacy.

58. Prior to 2008, the Department of International Relations was called the PLO Department of International and National Relations.

59. In 1993 and 1994, before the establishment of the formal office for the PLO Negotiations Affairs Department, Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala') led the small team negotiating the Oslo Accords.

60. Saeb Erekat took over in 2004 and passed away in Nov. 2020.

61. At that time, the Ministry of Foreign and Expatriate Affairs was called the "Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation."

62. Following the legislative elections of 2006, Mahmoud Zahar was PNA foreign minister for three months in the Hamas-led government of Ismail Haniyeh.

63. Prior to PLO PNC elections in 2018, the department was named the "Department of Culture and Information."

64. Hanan Ashrawi resigned from the PLO in 2021.



Design: Jack Rabah - Cover photo: APA Images

For the most informative Palestinian perspectives and analysis, follow Al-Shabaka:



Join our
e-mail list



E-mail us



Visit
al-shabaka.org



Follow us
on twitter



Like us on
Facebook