



REVIVING A PALESTINIAN POWER: THE DIASPORA AND THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

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The Palestinian people and their national representative, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), face critical challenges that they are ill prepared to address. The strong national movement that the PLO established in the 1960s, pulling together dispersed Palestinian refugees and exiles to face Israel's colonial project and reclaim their homeland, is now much diminished. This is in large part due to the growth of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), which was established under the Oslo accords in 1994 as the nucleus of a Palestinian state, and which itself is now hollowed out by Israel's unremitting settlement building and other human rights violations. Its goal of an independent sovereign state is more elusive than ever.

The grievously weakened Palestinian bodies are not equipped to face the threats posed by Israel's colonization and further annexation – which were openly support by the outgoing Trump administration – as well as by the Jewish Nation State Basic Law that leaves Palestinians in both Israel and the OPT in a precarious legal position. Meanwhile, the Israeli government has been increasingly successful at neutralizing key Arab, European, Asian, African, and Latin American countries, eroding the international consensus on a just resolution that secures inalienable Palestinian rights. A major blow was dealt in late summer 2020 with the decision of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to [normalize relations](#) with Israel.

The failure of the PLO to imagine that such a reversal in US policy could happen or to understand the fragility of the diplomatic approach is a sign of its failure to see national liberation as a popular struggle. These grievous setbacks are all taking place against the physical threat that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to the already vulnerable Palestinian populations in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and Lebanon and Syria. There have been many initiatives to tackle these challenges, most recently a [renewed commitment](#) in September 2020 by Fatah, Hamas, and other Palestinian factions to [end their divisions](#). There are also many studies that seek to map a way forward (including a recent report crafted by 12 Al-Shabaka members – [Reclaiming the PLO, Re-Engaging Youth](#)).

This study is the first of its kind on the PLO diplomatic corps and its engagement with the Palestinian diaspora. The assumption underlying the study is that a more active and regular engagement between the diaspora and the PLO diplomatic missions would strengthen the PLO and its representative character, and help to revive some of the power and potential of the diaspora that was in evidence in the 1970s and 1980s. The idea for such a study came about when a member of the team spoke to a young diplomat who explained how they managed to achieve important work to protect Palestinian rights despite the internal difficulties and lack of clarity about the objectives and strategies of the national project. This sparked our interest in the activity of the corps and in particular its relationship with the Palestinian diaspora, which had once worked closely with the representatives of the PLO and which has now become increasingly alienated from it. As a former diplomat put it, “The diaspora is no longer seen as a priority for the PLO; as a result, we lost what used to be a superpower.”

The study reviews the way in which the PLO arose in the diaspora among exiles and refugees in the 1960s, built connections with the Palestinian people, established Palestinian national identity on the global stage, and advanced international recognition of Palestinian rights. Indeed, the PLO prioritized the establishment of representative offices in foreign capitals as a way to build the necessary infrastructure for global advocacy in support of Palestinian self-determination and sovereignty. Diaspora Palestinians were, and some still are, a vital component of that infrastructure within their adopted countries.

The Oslo Accords that began in 1993 changed the engagement between the PLO and the diaspora. Many diaspora constituencies withdrew active support for the PLO because of their opposition to the signing of the interim agreement which legitimated Israeli presence in the OPT and undermined refugee rights and claims. Partly as a result, knowledge of the PLO's history and the vital role it played in the Palestinian struggle for self-determination has been lost to the post-Oslo generations. Most see the PLO as indistinguishable from the PNA, which represents only the Palestinians of the OPT.

Many youth in the homeland and in exile are unaware of the role the PLO has played in preserving Palestinian national identity and how effective it has been in shifting the world's view of the Palestinian cause from a mere humanitarian concern to a legitimate struggle for national liberation. There is also insufficient awareness of how PLO representatives have worked to sustain the international consensus around Palestinian rights – many sacrificing their lives to do so in the 1970s and 1980s – and how these norms underpin legal efforts to end Israeli impunity, provide accountability to Palestinian victims, and stem ongoing displacement and dispossession in what remains of the Palestinian homeland. That pro-Israel advocacy groups and lobbyists expend millions of dollars in an attempt to delegitimize such Palestinian diplomatic and legal initiatives underscores the importance of the PLO's work in these fields. Without the PLO, there would be no recognized national body representing Palestinians in critical international forums.

The PLO's representativeness has been negatively impacted by the physical and political fragmentation of the Palestinian body politic, and especially by the rivalry between the two main political factions, Fatah and Hamas. That rivalry is also reflected in the relationship between the PLO's diplomatic corps and the diaspora, many of whom sympathize with, or are members of, the Islamic movement which is not part of the PLO. Moreover, the singular focus of Palestinian national institutions on establishing the trappings of statehood before securing Palestinian rights has compromised the corps' former role of representing the liberation movement abroad and diverted its attention from driving international solidarity and support for Palestinian rights.

In fact, almost all the responsibilities of the PLO's Political Bureau – the central organ for executing the PLO's political platform and liberation strategy – were transferred to the PNA's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) although the PNA was never mandated to handle foreign affairs. This sent a strong signal to Palestinian refugees and exiles that their voice and their experience of displacement and dispossession was no longer the central priority of the organization.

As will be discussed in this study, the PLO's responsibility for the corps now hangs by a thread which may be irreparably cut should the chair of the PLO Executive Committee no longer also hold the seat of the presidency of the PNA. Though all Palestinian embassies and missions are deemed PLO offices, most of the responsibilities for the missions come under MoFA's management.

A critical responsibility retained by the PLO by virtue of its international legal personality is the signing of treaties and bilateral agreements, including a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel. Should the overlapping roles between the PLO chair and the PNA president no longer exist and should the PLO fail to reassert its authority over international relations and the diplomatic corps, the Palestinian national cause could be reduced to a territorial struggle over what is left of the Palestinian homeland inside the OPT, and the diaspora – along with its interests and claims – will be completely unmoored from the national liberation movement.

Listening to the Diplomatic Corps

In our interviews with the diplomats, we found that the confusion of PLO and PNA responsibilities and authorities impacts the ability of the diplomatic corps in many ways, including in its ability to engage with the diaspora. Another key concern, repeatedly shared, was the lack of a political direction and strategy within which the diplomats could frame their work. They also noted other problems due, in part, to a lack of transparency in the selection of mission staff, and inefficiencies and infighting in some missions key to the Palestinian cause where there had once been a high degree of effectiveness. These challenges, which are also common in the diplomatic offices of sovereign states and which are not new to the PLO, are not ones a national liberation movement can afford. On the other hand, the study also found that PLO missions led by seasoned diplomats and with effective staff have been capable of advancing Palestinian interests within the country of posting or the international body to which they were assigned.

Another challenge experienced within some missions related to the role and responsibilities of the diplomatic corps as well as the chain of authority which were not clearly defined or understood by staff. For example, some diplomats considered themselves PNA diplomats, while others were emphatic about their belonging to the PLO. This cognitive dissonance created something of a division between those who saw themselves as revolutionaries and activists, and others who understood their role as that of traditional civil servants.

The diplomatic corps' ability to function effectively has also been impacted by the Fatah-Hamas divide, the PNA's record of human rights violations, its lack of a democratic mandate, and security collaboration with Israel, all of which have served to alienate both Palestinians and the solidarity community from the missions. The missions' loss of this support makes it difficult for the diplomatic corps to present a strong and unified message in tandem with the diaspora, at great cost to the national liberation movement. Certainly, an effectively functioning and well-resourced Palestinian mission working closely with the diaspora community and solidarity movement would be better placed, for example, to respond to Israel's campaign to conflate criticism of its occupation, siege and other rights violations with anti-Semitism. In fact, the inability to mobilize the strength and power of some diaspora communities in countries where their numbers are politically significant means diplomats are more susceptible to being cold-shouldered by a host government concerned with appearing insufficiently pro-Israel. When the diaspora and solidarity community do not value the work of the PLO's mission, it is easier for the host government to eschew engagement with Palestinian diplomats.

Listening to the Diaspora

The study focuses on three specific events to better understand how and when the diaspora engages with the diplomatic corps on a matter of national concern. Two of three events gave contrasting insights: the bid for Palestinian statehood presented a positive engagement between the diaspora and the corps while the PNC elections presented a negative one.

The third event, the Trump administration's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem seemed to show the weakness of the PLO given what appeared to be little engagement with the diaspora.

The PLO/PNA effort to upgrade Palestine's status at the UN from observer to non-member state was generally viewed as a well-organized effort with clear goals, direction, communication, and messaging from headquarters. The corps worked as a smoothly functioning system not just in the country of posting, but across countries and regions, and as a result, media coverage increased. Furthermore, as members of the corps put it, they viewed every effort to formalize recognition of Palestine as a source of power for the Palestinian people in their search for ways to respond to the extreme right-wing government in Israel and its settler movement, as well as the regimes that were eschewing international law.

As for the diaspora, some activists who had previously distanced themselves from the PLO/PNA willingly engaged with the corps' representatives to advance the big for statehood, in particular because it reasserted Palestinian agency and challenged US control of the agenda. This shows the potential for mobilization and joint action by the PLO missions and the diaspora. In other cases, however, the missions did not engage with the diaspora on the issue even though the diaspora was keen to do so.

The effort to select representatives for the convening of the PNC in 2018 had a negative impact on the diaspora. Although Palestinian community organizations are themselves intended to nominate their own members, the interviews made clear that the missions were closely involved in the selection. In one country where the community had previously given PNC elections the highest importance, unilateral moves were said to have been taken by the mission, and in the end, representatives were nominated "by Ramallah." In another country, the process was said to be "totally ad hoc" and characterized by a lack of transparency. In a third, the process was described as having led to a PNC "that absolutely doesn't represent the Palestinian people." Overall, the diaspora's experience in the 2018 PNC appears to have reinforced its alienation from the PLO.

As for the Trump decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, the PLO and PNA appear to have missed an opportunity to engage the diaspora and solidarity movement to amplify Palestinian voices and increase the pressure for Palestinian rights.

Beyond these three specific areas of focus, the research team identified other areas of concern regarding diaspora engagement with the PLO:

- Many Palestinians in the diaspora and in the homeland are strongly opposed to PLO/PNA policies such as security coordination with Israel. Among other problems, this leads to contradictory messages being communicated about Palestinian rights to the host country and to solidarity activists.
- Some missions are less effective at advancing the Palestinian cause due to a bureaucratic culture that results in little engagement with the host country, and even less with the diaspora, as well as little outreach to the media or country influencers. As a result, the field is left open for the Israeli lobby to dominate the discourse and policy on Palestinian rights.
- In other cases, there was a tendency to focus efforts on governments rather than on the diaspora and the solidarity movement which were well-placed, and in some cases, better-placed, to advance a change in discourse.

- In some countries where there was an active diaspora, it was not clear to what extent the broader Palestinian community was aware of the work of the mission, its responsibilities, or how to hold it accountable as their representative.

Finally, a major deficiency in the diplomatic corps-diaspora relationship is the limited – and in most cases, nonexistent – engagement with groups and individuals associated with, or perceived to be associated with, Hamas and other Islamist organizations.

This is largely due to the Fatah-Hamas schism that is reflected in how the Fatah-ruled PLO prioritizes its work and relationships at the mission level, but it may also be attributed to legal limitations involving Hamas within the host country.

Despite these criticisms, almost none of the interviewees questioned the legitimacy of the PLO as the national representative organization of the Palestinian people. Indeed, despite the rejection of security coordination, authoritarianism, and the other problematic policies of the PNA, where the goals are well-defined and there is good outreach and communication between the corps and the diaspora, members of the diaspora have shown receptivity to working with the mission. This could be built upon to reform and strengthen the PLO to fulfill its role as a representative body.

Recommendations to Diaspora Palestinians

1. Diaspora Palestinians should develop a regular relationship with the PLO mission and communicate their views and expectations, as well as their critiques of policies that undermine Palestinian rights. Until actions are taken to reform structures of the PLO and PNA, direct engagement with the mission is the only way for the diaspora to be heard by a representative of the national movement.
2. More direct engagement could also enable members of the diaspora to assist PLO representatives in addressing various challenges. For example, the diaspora can play a constructive role in: convening forums to discuss the Palestinian national project; helping to bridge the split between Fatah and Hamas; insisting on steps to end security coordination with Israel as well as authoritarianism in Palestine; and helping to push back against Israel's campaign to conflate criticism of its actions with anti-Semitism.
3. Diaspora representatives should demand that the PLO Executive Committee appoint and empower an ombudsperson to respond to diaspora complaints and concerns about a mission's work where those complaints cannot be addressed at the mission level.
4. The diaspora should prioritize education, particularly for the youth and emerging leaders, about the history of the PLO, its achievements, the sacrifices that many PLO members – including of the diplomatic corps – have made, and the external challenges the organization is facing.

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.

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 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.
4. The PLO executive committee should create and empower an office of ombudsperson 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. This process must be based on transparent and agreed-upon criteria for selection of members to the PNC, and it must promote consensus-building around a renewed national project.