

RECLAIMING THE PLO RE-ENGAGING YOUTH

*An Al-Shabaka Policy Circle Report
Co-Facilitated by Marwa Fatafta and Alaa Tartir*



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INTRODUCTION: RECLAIMING THE PLO, RE-ENGAGING YOUTH

The Palestinian national movement is in an acute state of crisis, facing unprecedented obstacles to its quest for self-determination. The Oslo Accords of the 1990s and the statehood project they produced have failed on every count to secure justice for the Palestinian people. On the contrary, Israel is tightening its military control of the Palestinian territory it occupied in 1967 and expanding its illegal settlement enterprise. Meanwhile, annexation of the rest of the occupied territory is rapidly becoming reality.¹

Furthermore, the hundreds of thousands Palestinians dispossessed by Israel in 1948 and again in 1967 now account, with their descendants, for nearly half the Palestinian people. They are finding their road to return and indeed survival increasingly difficult due to US support and encouragement of Israel's violations of international law. At the same time, the systematic discrimination against the Palestinian citizens of Israel since the foundation of the state has been further codified and is increasingly being described as apartheid.

The leaderships of both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have shifted their priorities away from national liberation and the realization of the Palestinian people's fundamental rights. They are now focused on maintaining their grip on power over limited enclaves with no autonomy let alone sovereignty.

In the occupied West Bank President Mahmoud Abbas and his political faction Fatah continue to dominate both the PA and the PLO, monopolizing decision-making and crushing dissent. Similarly, Hamas, which wrested control of the Gaza Strip from the PA in 2007, runs a governance structure that parallels that of the PA and is also intolerant of dissent. And, so far, all attempts at mediation to reconcile Hamas and Fatah have failed to end the political schism.

1. This section draws on a background paper by Policy Circle Co-Facilitator Marwa Fatafta

In short, the Palestinians' governance structures at all levels are weak and undemocratic. There are no functioning mechanisms in place to ensure their renewal through an infusion of new political actors and ideas or to hold the leadership accountable to the Palestinian people they represent. Much ink has been spilled over the Palestinian leadership's shortcomings as well as Fatah's domination of Palestinian politics and institutions, the split between Fatah and Hamas, and the PA's alarming authoritarian trends. There are also a plethora of policy studies, future visioning exercises, and scenario planning for a post-Abbas era.

Nevertheless, there are still unanswered questions that need to be addressed regarding leadership of and accountability for the Palestinian national project. Accordingly, Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network convened its second Policy Circle on Leadership and Accountability to tackle the question of reclaiming the PLO as well as models of leadership and accountability that could reinvigorate the Palestinian political sphere.²

This Policy Circle is especially intended for Palestinian youth. Whereas older generations of Palestinians may be disillusioned by or feel disconnected from the PLO and from the Palestinian leadership, many Palestinian youth have little information about the PLO or any desire to engage with it.³ This report seeks to situate them in the challenges of the past and the potential of the future. In particular, two of the papers address youth leadership. It should be noted that the report is based on the premise that the PLO is the sole representative of the Palestinian people and does not suggest any alternative to it. Indeed, in the current circumstances and despite all the criticism and its dysfunction, the PLO remains

2. An Al-Shabaka Policy Circle is a specific methodology to engage a group of analysts from its network in longer-term study and reflection on an issue of key importance to the Palestinian people. The papers from the first Policy Circle on leadership and accountability can be found [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).

3. See [here for an engaging online resource](#) on the history of the Palestinian national movement from the 1950s through the 1970s produced by Oxford University, which includes primary resources and first-hand accounts collected from those who participated and lived through the period. For a thorough mapping of Palestinian politics [see here](#).

the only established institutional mechanism that can be revived and regain its representivity – if it regains its accountability.

Twelve members of Al-Shabaka's policy network participated in the analysis and synthesis that contributed to this report. Not all of the participants produced papers but each contributed in their own way. [Alaa Tartir](#) and [Marwa Fatafta](#) co-facilitated the Policy Circle while [Yara Hawari](#), [Inès Abdel Razek](#), and [Jamil Hilal](#) conducted peer reviews of all the papers, sharing their feedback and input at all stages. [Ali Abdel-Wahab](#), [Diana Buttu](#), and [Amjad Iraqi](#) generously contributed their ideas, insights, and expertise throughout the process. The remaining members of the policy circle took on the task of producing the specific papers identified by the group as set out below.

The first paper is by [Belal Shobaki](#), who has published widely on political Islam and identity. In *Reconstituting the PLO* he traces the political evolution of Hamas and Islamic Jihad and explains why the time has never been more propitious for their integration into the PLO, from which they have been excluded for nearly 30 years.

In "The Question of Representation" [Nijmeh Ali](#), who has studied the power of oppressed groups to create social change, then tackles the issue of the core nature of the PLO: Is it a liberation movement or a government? The system of representation that it must adopt – consensus-building versus elections – depends on the answer. A snapshot of the PLO's history and a chart showing the structure of the PLO can be found in Annexes I, II, and III.

[Fadi Quran](#) brings his expertise in international law, campaigning, and entrepreneurship to take on the issue of leadership in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Here he addresses the real, indeed sometimes deliberate, obstacles placed in the way of developing authentic leadership, particularly amongst the youth, and insists that leadership through resistance is the way out of the morass.

A compelling model of youth leadership is provided by [Dana El Kurd](#), who specializes in comparative politics and has studied the way international patrons

affect authoritarianism in the OPT. For this report, her analysis of the inception and development of the Palestinian Youth Movement and how it successfully evolves by identifying and addressing issues at every stage is highly instructive.

The final paper is by co-facilitator Marwa Fatafta, who centers the issue of accountability in the struggle to reclaim the PLO. She notes that accountability was tenuous even in the PLO's heyday, and discusses how to ensure it forms part of the future national movement.

In addition to the above papers, Dana El-Kurd, Nijmeh Ali, Fadi Quran and Jamil Hilal have contributed commentaries as part of their participation in the Policy Circle which can be found at Al-Shabaka's [website](#). The members of the Policy Circle also participated in an [Al-Shabaka Debate](#) on Palestinian participation in the Israeli elections, as well as two Al-Shabaka Policy Labs on [Palestinian Elections](#) and [Palestinian Leadership in the Time of Pandemic](#).

The Policy Circle Team would like to thank the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs Human Security Division as well as the Representative Office of Switzerland in Ramallah for their support of the process, while also underscoring that all the views, opinions, and analysis are our own. We would also like to thank our Al-Shabaka colleagues [Megan Driscoll](#), who oversaw the process, and [Mimi Kirk](#), who undertook quality control.

This is by no means an exhaustive or conclusive report. Indeed, separately from this Policy Circle, another Al-Shabaka team is producing a study, scheduled for publication by September 2020, that zeroes in on the PLO Diplomatic Corps to assess its role in representing the Palestinian people and the extent to which the Palestinian diaspora is or could be engaged in furthering national goals. In the meantime, you have in your hands the Policy Circle's report, which was undertaken as a contribution to the discussion of reviving the Palestinian liberation struggle for freedom and self-determination.



RECONSTITUTING THE PLO: CAN HAMAS AND ISLAMIC JIHAD BE BROUGHT INTO THE FOLD?

By Belal Shobaki

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

However, the position of the two Islamist movements has been based not only on criticism of the PLO's

political platform and organizational structure but also on doctrinal grounds. While it took Fatah just one year to accede to the PLO after issuing its 1967 statement, neither Hamas, launched in 1987, nor Islamic Jihad have been able to join to this day. For many years neither movement could separate its political from its religious beliefs without completely undermining its core tenets and losing its constituencies. However, in the three eventful decades spent in the Palestinian arena both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, particularly Hamas, have evolved their position toward the PLO.

This paper discusses the evolution of each Islamist movement over the past three decades as well as its growing pragmatism. It discusses the ways in which the

obstacles to bringing the two organizations into the fold are now more political than doctrinal, and identifies the entry points to rebuilding the Palestinian national movement

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

When Hamas issued [its charter](#) in 1988 it addressed the PLO in Article 27:

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

Clearly, these positive words about the PLO could not bridge the secular-religious divide between the two movements. Indeed, Hamas's position suggests that it sought to rule from the outset. While presenting itself as a liberation movement against the occupation, Hamas had a clear vision of the future of Palestine as an Islamic country where Islam was practiced as a way of life. Its position also suggested that the PLO's failure to embrace Islam in this way would prevent Hamas from joining ranks with Fatah against the occupation, and even that it would not fight the occupation under the umbrella of the PLO. In fact, Hamas repeatedly called for acts of resistance during the First Intifada [that were different](#) than those called for by factions in the PLO. In response, the PLO questioned Hamas's patriotism and accused the movement of sabotaging the national consensus.

Developments in the last few years have made it more possible to consider a revival of the PLO although there are still institutional jealousies to overcome.

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

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

As the First Intifada quieted down and the Oslo era began, the PLO entered a state of suspended animation, while the Hamas charter was a neglected document to which no one referred other than scholars in their research and Israeli politicians in their efforts to condemn Hamas in diplomatic fora or media outlets. During the 1990s, Fatah was preoccupied with running the Palestinian Authority (PA) under occupation and sidelined the PLO, while Hamas undertook armed resistance, becoming not only Israel's target but also that of the PA security services.

The failure of the Camp David talks in 2000 to transform the post-Oslo PA into a Palestinian state and

the outbreak of the Second Intifada inaugurated a new phase in which the PLO factions returned to resistance against the occupation alongside Hamas and Islamic Jihad. As in the case of the First Intifada, the latter's resistance was not carried out under the same political umbrella. However, internal Palestinian disagreements were less acute, particularly given Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's widescale invasion of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

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

The 2005 Cairo Declaration is still a solid basis for reconvening the political factions that are the key constituency of the PLO.

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

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

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

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

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

Beyond the Lost Years of Division

By signing the Cairo Declaration, with its call to revive the PLO on the basis of consensus, Hamas and Islamic Jihad believed that the issue of the PLO's ideology as

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

well as the question of the adoption of Islam had been transcended. Based on this declaration both movements could join the PLO since the prerequisites for accession were procedural rather than substantive.

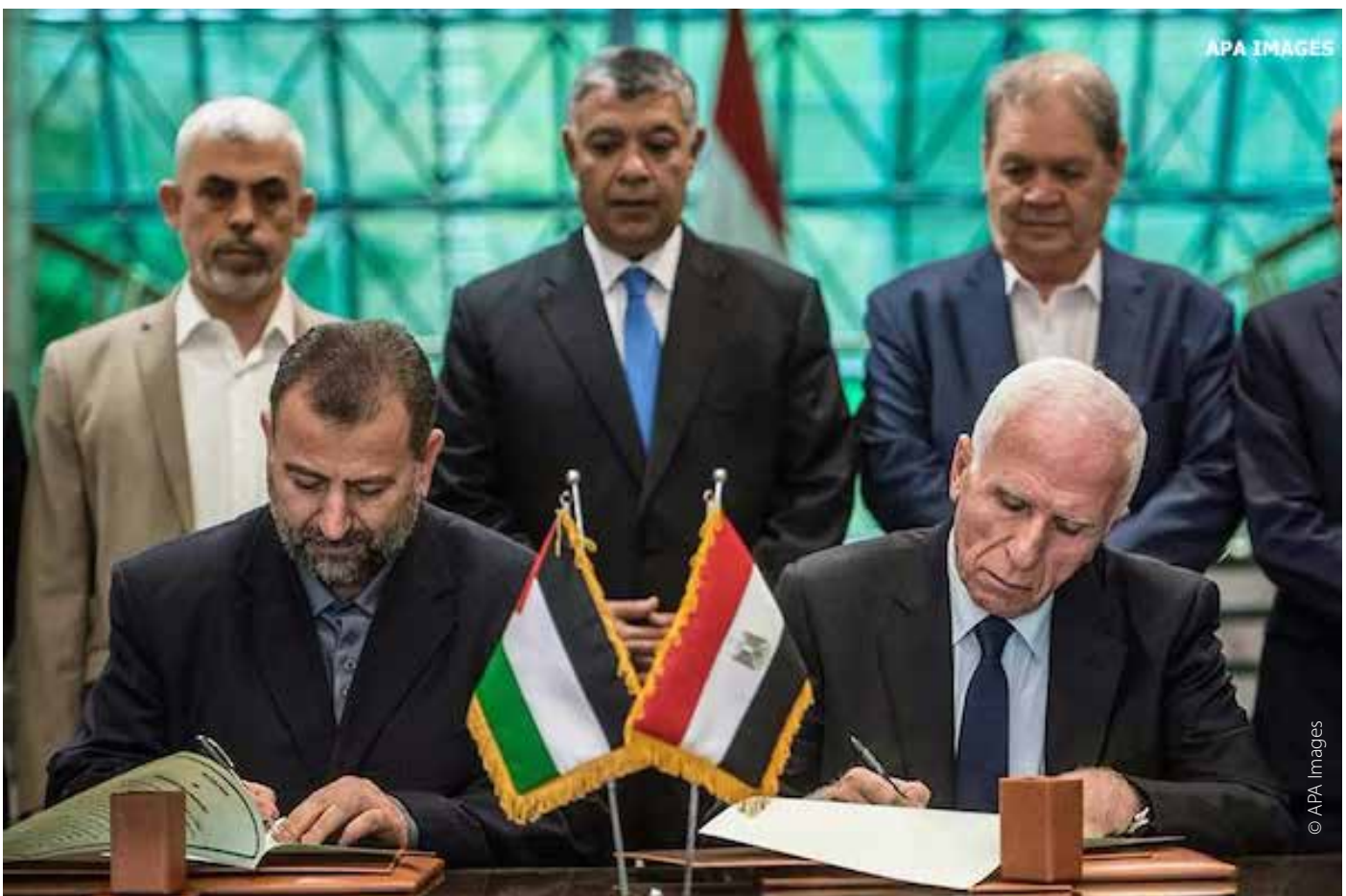
However, subsequent political developments thwarted any constructive way forward. In 2006, Hamas won the legislative elections but Fatah as well as regional and international actors refused to accept this outcome and sought to sabotage its rule. In 2007 Hamas allowed its military wing to [secure control](#)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

Developments in the last few years have made it more possible to consider a revival of the PLO although

there are still institutional jealousies to overcome. For example, Fatah is said to be keen to revive the PLO so as to create a new space outside the PA that would cut Hamas down to size. Moreover, Fatah is believed to want to revive the PLO without reforms or elections – a key point of disagreement. [It has also demanded](#) that Hamas and Islamic Jihad recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people without preconditions, which both movements have repeatedly rejected.

Nevertheless, pressures on both movements as well as the regional transformations associated with the Arab uprisings, declining Syrian and Iranian support, and the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have pushed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to alter their political discourse, including on the PLO.

Hamas's 2017 [document of general principles](#) and policies has superseded the original charter, stating that “the PLO is a national framework for the Palestinian



people inside and outside of Palestine. It should therefore be preserved, developed and rebuilt on democratic foundations so as to secure the participation of all the constituents and forces of the Palestinian people, in a manner that safeguards Palestinian rights.” This statement gives a clear indication that Hamas is paying more attention to democratic frameworks and political rights rather than referring back to its old Islamist literature. This major shift can be used to facilitate Hamas’s joining the PLO.

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

Ending the Divide and Rebuilding the PLO

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

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

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

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

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

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



THE QUESTION OF PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATION: ELECTIONS VS. CONSENSUS BUILDING

By Nijmeh Ali

Palestinians have for years attempted to revive their national representative, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). As part of these efforts, many Palestinians have demanded direct elections to the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the PLO's legislative body. However, the PLO is not a state and the Palestinian people have multiple civic statuses depending on their geographic location. Thus, any attempt to address the question of elections must take such challenges into account. This paper aims to widen the discussion of representation by examining two key questions: The form of representation and the challenges posed by the structures of the PLO itself, and concludes with some suggestions for the future.

Securing Representation Through Engagement

Arabic distinguishes between *tamtheel syasi* (political representation) and *inkherat syasi* (political engagement). This is a vital distinction and any discussion of PLO representation must be defined in the political terms of engagement and participation. According to the PLO [Basic Law](#) Palestinian engagement in PLO institutions is a national duty, as is written in chapter one, article 4:¹

All Palestinians are natural members of the Palestine Liberation Organization, performing their duty to liberate their country in accordance with their abilities and qualifications. The Palestinian people is the base of this Organization.

1. The Basic Law was first issued in 1964 and amended in 1968. It was further amended in 1996 to comply with the PLO's acceptance of the Oslo peace process.

The fact that the PLO adopted a guerrilla style of resistance and insisted that Palestinian decision-making be independent of the Arab regimes gave it the legitimacy to mobilize and engage the Palestinians, particularly those in the refugee camps, who had hitherto been viewed as unfortunate victims. As Fathi Abu al-Ardat [put it](#): “For the first time after the Nakba and the defeat of 1967, the establishment of the PLO created a point of reference around which our people could gather and pool their energies.”

Thus, after the guerrilla organizations took over the PLO in 1968-69, ordinary Palestinians became deeply engaged in PLO institutions, both political and community-based. The membership of the Palestinian National Council was reformulated to include diverse factions, groups, and individuals, amongst them representatives of refugee camps and professional associations. Authentic representation, therefore, was gained *through* political engagement and by creating a sense of belonging. The people at all levels gave legitimacy to the PLO because of their involvement in collective action. This form of political representation was similar to that of other national liberation movements.²

In 1974, ten years after the establishment of the PLO, the Arab Summit in Rabat [recognized it](#) as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” considering it responsible for acting on behalf of Palestinians everywhere.³ That same year on November 22, the PLO was given observer status at the United Nations General Assembly, representing the Palestinian people in the name of Palestine. It also represented Palestine at the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and in many other platforms, and opened new embassies and representative offices around the world.⁴

This type of political representation, achieved through regional and international recognition, built on the popular representation that the PLO had previously achieved and was celebrated by Palestinians, especially as

it reinforced the independence of the Palestinian political decision. It enabled the PLO to negotiate and sign political agreements representing the Palestinian people as was later done with the Oslo Accords in the 1990s.

Any discussion of PLO representation must be defined in the political terms of engagement and participation.

For a liberation movement like the PLO the legitimacy of representation was fundamental in creating the Palestinian national movement and its structures while rebuilding the Palestinian identity by engaging the people in a common political national project. It is worth emphasizing that representation was achieved through securing engagement and seeking recognition rather than through elections (see also Mouin Rabbani’s argument in [this roundtable](#)). The PLO’s representative character was not questioned until it was seen as abandoning the Palestinian people’s national demands.

The PLO’s Disengagement from the Palestinian People

Until 1988 the PLO aimed to represent all Palestinians and to mobilize them to take part in the liberation of Palestine. In fact, the abandonment of that goal began gradually in 1974 with the PLO’s adoption of its [Ten Point Program](#), which states its willingness to build a national authority “over every part of Palestine territory that is liberated” with the aim of eventually completing the liberation of all Palestinian territory. However, the PNC meeting of 1988 marks the official acceptance of the two-state solution – which would reduce Palestine and the Palestinians both geographically and demographically – as a final resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PA) within the limited territorial zones agreed with Israel through the Oslo Accords marked a significant stage in the PLO’s evolution and brought new challenges. While it officially remained the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, there was growing doubt about the extent of its political representativity. To begin with, the center of gravity of political activity

2. The Palestinian national movement falls within the broad tradition of national liberation movements, with which it shares many core principles, including self-determination, popular sovereignty, mass mobilization, armed struggle, social and cultural liberation, and internationalism.

3. It should be noted that the Palestinian citizens of Israel were not part of the PLO’s formation. Although they could not publicly recognize its representation without facing severe repercussions from the Israeli establishment, their political leadership still viewed the PLO as the Palestinian people’s national representative.

4. Al-Shabaka is producing a study, forthcoming in summer 2020, on the PLO’s diplomatic corps to assess its role in representing the Palestinian people and the extent to which the Palestinian diaspora is or could be engaged in furthering Palestinian national goals.

shifted to the territory Israel occupied in 1967. Further, the PA, which was originally supposed to operate as an administrative entity for five years, became a permanent political reality dependent on voters residing in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

Thus, in addition to the exclusion of the Palestinians in Israel, Palestinians living in the diaspora were marginalized in the new political structures, as was their engagement in PLO institutions. Furthermore, PLO structures were hollowed out as decision-making moved to the PA and its institutions, although the same person remained the chairman of the PLO and president of the PA (Yasser Arafat held these positions until his death in 2004, when Mahmoud Abbas took over). In effect, after Oslo the PLO lost its primary purpose of liberation and with it a significant segment of the Palestinian people – the refugees. The PA dominated the political scene, representing a new era of state building, governance, and citizenship, and the majority of the Palestinian people were not part of it.

The question of representation, therefore, goes beyond the narrow focus of numbers, seats, and power sharing. Rather, it is about which Palestinians the PLO and the PA are seeking to represent and, more importantly, what political project the PLO is seeking to achieve. Following the classic definition of political representation, it is possible that structural reforms could enhance the representative status of the PLO.⁵ However, the question remains as to whether restructured institutions would in fact represent Palestinian demands for self-determination and freedom.

Reforming the PLO: Back to the Past or Forward to the Future?

The current structure of the PLO is grounded in the amended PLO Charter and the Basic Law that was established in 1968 after the Palestinian resistance groups took control. The main amendment undertaken by the new leadership was to move the PNC away from an electoral system of representation based on majority rule to a [quota system and decision-making by consensus](#). Consensus, known in Arabic as *ijmaa*, was adopted to strengthen political unity rather than rivalry and clashes,

5. The dominant definition of political representation is that of Hannah Pitkin, which associates representation with democracy, authorization, and accountability through elections. However, this definition presents one model of political representation and leaves other types out.

and to ensure that specific groups associated with Arab regimes would not have the ability to undermine the process. In addition, it was extremely difficult to hold democratic elections given the dispersal of Palestinians who were now under the control of different states.

Moreover, decision-making by consensus suited the nature of the PLO as an umbrella for the many revolutionary groups it encompassed. It also suited a context characterized by rapid, dramatic change because it privileged the pursuit of common goals over ideological differences. In addition, achieving consensus depended on negotiations and agreement amongst all the parties, which had the potential to empower smaller parties and groups such as women and unions. However, theory does not necessarily reflect reality, especially as relates to the political behavior of collective societies such as Palestinian society.

To understand politics in Palestinian society also requires understanding Arab social structure. Halim Barakat [emphasizes](#) that Arab society is a mirror image of the family. Parties and Palestinian factions became the new family for members who transformed the same hierarchy of age and loyalty to the father/leader.⁶ Therefore, despite the development of the Palestinian national movement and the shift from the pre-1948 familial model of politics, when the Husseini and Nashashibi families dominated, the political behavior has not greatly matured. This affected the representative nature of the PLO and helps to explain the lack of new faces and names in leadership positions.

In reality, therefore, the quota system and the method of appointment facilitated the domination of powerful political parties in the PLO, mainly Fatah. These mechanisms also maintained social hierarchies through the appointment of “suitable” persons according to the standards prevailing in Palestinian society, marginalizing such groups as women, youth, new factions, and those who opposed PLO political decisions. Thus, the downside of the consensus model of politics is that it risks the domination of one party over the others. Indeed, many view the PLO and Fatah as two sides of the same coin.

The unchanged nature of the PLO’s structure has contributed to the centralization of power in the hands of the same groups and individuals given the absence

6. Hisham Sharabi proposes the theory of [neopatriarchy](#) for understanding power as a theoretical formulation that “occupies the space between traditional patriarchy and modernity” – providing a theoretical explanation for power in non-Western societies.

of elections or expanded consensus building to bring in groups such as Hamas, which represent significant numbers of Palestinians but are in opposition to PLO policies – though their stance appears to be softening (see Belal Shobaki's paper in this report). There is no new blood to reinvigorate the PNC or the other key bodies of the PLO, the Executive Committee and the Central Council. Nor have there been elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in the OPT or for the president of the state of Palestine since the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 (local elections have continued to be held).

Resolving the legitimacy of Palestinian political representation is about defining the nature of the PLO as a liberation movement or a statehood-building organization.

This state of affairs harms not only the effectiveness of the political system but also the legitimacy of the PLO itself. Reforming the PLO is fundamental if it is to be more representative and regain its legitimacy amongst the Palestinian people. It is worth mentioning that in addition to the absence of representative elections or the expansion of the PNC to include significant new groups, there is duplication and concentration of power in the PLO's structures. The Executive Committee (EC) and the Central Council (PCC) share common functions and power is concentrated in these two bodies – particularly the EC – at the expense of the PNC. A redistribution of power should be considered in any reform of the PLO, with consideration given to dismantling the EC and keeping the PNC and the PCC.

Many of the initiatives to reform the PLO suggest practical frameworks for conducting elections and distributing power. However, most of these initiatives lack a deep discussion of the nature, role, and functions of the PLO – and most importantly, its political program. Unless there is an answer to the question of what the PLO is – a liberation movement, a state-building organization, or both, it will become an empty shell with fictitious institutions. Furthermore, it is essential to determine the PLO's role vis-à-vis the PA and to reinvigorate its representative status through engagement from and by the Palestinians. Without these essential steps structural reforms and elections are useless.

In addition to being an umbrella organization that brings together numerous Palestinian political parties, popular organizations, and independent figures, the PLO occupies an essential place in the Palestinian collective memory. It has effectively served as the national home for the Palestinian people, housing their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. The PLO did not start out as a political organization, but rather as a liberation movement with a hierarchy and a military character. Once it moved to establishing a Palestinian state it found itself stuck in the transition process from national liberation to state-building, and its structures and functions lost their effectiveness.

Therefore, resolving the legitimacy of Palestinian political representation is neither about abolishing the PLO or dismantling the PA, nor is it about holding new elections, introducing institutional reforms, or reviving systems based on majority rule or consensus building. It is about defining the nature of the PLO: Is it a liberation movement or a statehood-building organization? This is the question that must urgently be addressed.

If the PLO resolves the question of its nature and is ready to address the challenge of how it should be structured, then the federal model might be an option to consider because of its potential to emphasize local representation and activate Palestinian communities in their different political and geographical locations. The model also creates a grassroots leadership network.

Elections are essentially a practical method that represents the people's will and civic engagement in a certain political system. If the PLO chooses to be restructured as a liberation movement, then the chosen method of representation should emphasize internal unity and Palestinian consensus-building to minimize internal clashes. On the other hand, if the PLO decides to go for statehood-building then the method of elections should reflect the internal diversity that creates a culture of political debate, differences, and competition.

There is no magical formula for how to conduct elections or achieve representation. Rather, it is essential to grapple with the PLO's purpose, the style of elections, and the PLO's structures and capacity for representation. Most important of all is to rebuild the Palestinian people's trust in their institutions and in themselves as political actors. This is as fundamental for civic engagement as it is for reinforcing the sense of belonging.



PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP THROUGH RESISTANCE OR LEADERLESS SUBSISTENCE? THE ROLE OF YOUTH

By Fadi Quran

One of the biggest challenges facing Palestinians today is the absence of effective and unified leadership. The predicament over how best to fill this void is a central policy focus, not only among Palestinians themselves but also among Western and regional Arab decision makers, as well as Israeli intelligence and military strategists.

Defining which actors run key Palestinian political institutions such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA), and even those who play key economic and societal roles, is a form of power through which foreign actors can influence, co-opt, or destroy the Palestinian struggle and its hopes of achieving freedom, justice, and dignity.

Palestinian politics have never been homogenous. However, with the “self-rule” agreement of Oslo, factional hostilities became more divisive since there was now something more tangible to fight over, namely the mock state structures that offered access to power, position, and wealth. Consequently, political institutions, particularly the PLO, PA, and Hamas, have become central sites of power. These have allowed a minority of local political elites and their international patrons to redefine national interests and local power dynamics.

Efforts to influence Palestinian leaders, and to eventually decide who holds the mantle of leadership and power in Palestine, have taken [numerous forms](#) across the last

eight decades, from political assassinations to structured financial support. These efforts, moreover, have extended into the elite strata of society and, while this is not a new phenomenon, it is particularly harmful given the extent of weakness and fragmentation in which the Palestinians presently find themselves.

At this precarious moment in the history of the Palestinian struggle, the right leadership is a critical factor in defining whether Israel and its allies manage to decimate the Palestinian national pursuit of self-determination once and for all, or whether the struggle gets back on track to achieve freedom and rights.

This chapter begins by describing the current state of leadership turmoil and then sets out a proposed leadership model. It goes on to examine the numerous attempts by both local and international elites to undermine such a model and to socio-engineer the next generation of Palestinian leaders. It focuses on the prospects of this new generation of leaders and the obstacles being put in the way of youth leadership, from co-optation to more ruthless methods. It concludes by suggesting an alternative path to leadership.

Fragmentation and Uncertainty

President Mahmoud Abbas, ever the astute political actor when it comes to maintaining his hold on power, consolidated his control through such actions as reshuffling the central and revolutionary councils of his Fatah Party in his image. He also (re)molded the Palestinian National Council (PNC), considered the parliament of the PLO, into an emasculated echo chamber. Palestinian security forces, which Abbas leads with close support from the head of Palestinian General Intelligence, Majed Farraj, clamp down on any effective form of dissent, from verbal critiques of the leadership to mass organizing. Moreover, the PA's continued imposition of its own sanctions on Gaza over and above Israel's already draconian sanctions has led to a deepening of disunity and mass societal disaffection with both Fatah and Hamas. Abbas also restructured the Palestinian judicial system through the appointment of judges to the high court and relevant affiliate court councils, with the tacit precondition being allegiance to him.

Yet with the immense challenges facing Palestinians today, it would be an oversimplification to merely blame the leadership for its disastrous failures since the Oslo Accords and the authoritarian policies that followed. One must not forget the imposed political and geographic fragmentation Palestinians face and the decades of societal (re)engineering supported and implemented by the international community. One must therefore critique the PLO's top brass for their lack of vision and action while also acknowledging that they have become pawns in a far more intricate chain of agents, interests, and interactions.

Given the current state of fragmentation and the specific circumstances in each locale, many alternative movements, from those operating inside the 1948 territories to the diaspora, have failed to address the continued institutional relevance, however dwindling, of the PLO.

In view of this morass, effective leadership becomes central in redefining the political trajectory of Palestine's struggle for freedom. Yet instead of discussing the leadership Palestinians want/need, most analysts focus on the individuals that outside powers want to impose as Palestinian leaders and/or how Abbas and the current political elite envision the transfer of power to maintain the status quo, and/or whether societal collapse is inevitable.

Thus "leadership" is framed as something that can only come from the top down. This assumption is false: Real agency and power do exist in Palestinian society that is capable of shifting the rules of the game. This is why a true transformation of leadership under the current Palestinian context must start from the bottom up. Such a transformation requires rekindling a sense of agency in both individuals and communities, and thus expanding leadership across every level of society, with the end goal of freedom and justice for the Palestinian people and building a social contract that is founded on dignity for all.

The next section discusses the type of new leadership model Palestinians need, a leadership that must be effective, visionary, molded by acts of resistance, and capable of transforming the present power dynamics.

Resistance as a Path to Leadership: A Model

Informed by the realities set out above as well as successful historical models of liberation struggles and my own experience as a grassroots organizer and policy analyst, I propose a leadership model that is best suited to the Palestinian context. I refer to this model as “leadership through resistance.” It is founded on three pillars.

First, the ability to inspire and coalesce others around common goals. This requires [shouldering the responsibility of creating](#) “conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty.” This does *not* mean having an official position or being a charismatic public persona, but rather taking full ownership of organizing others to pursue a common purpose.

Second, resistance, defined as an organized and strategic effort by some or all of the Palestinian people (and their allies) to alter the balance of power between the oppressed and the oppressor, using ethical tactics that disrupt the oppressor’s civil order and stability.

Third, the emergence of adept and self-sacrificing individuals from the grassroots who recognize their agency and responsibility to organize and create conditions to defend Palestinian rights. This will be difficult to achieve because it will require consistent acts of effective resistance that build credibility despite a deeply authoritarian and oppressive national context. But it is necessary.

Although it is not laid out in these exact terms by academics, history shows that in many contexts where oppression and injustice are rife, the path to leadership is paved with resistance. Take the example of Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Mohandas Gandhi in India. All of these leaders first began by playing a key role in their nations’ liberation struggles by leading different modes of resistance targeted at their oppressors and gained credibility and power through that process.¹ This is not just an anti-colonial/Global South phenomenon. George Washington’s credibility emerged through his leadership

1. To repeat, while resistance here is broadly defined as any organized effort by parts of society to withstand, disrupt, and defeat an oppressive power, in the context of this piece resistance consists of moral, strategic, and effective actions.

of the revolution and Charles De Gaulle’s through the resistance in World War II.

Such leaders were by no means faultless, but they gained legitimacy via their sacrifices for the principles they steadfastly upheld, initially rejecting any compromise on their peoples’ rights for “the right price.” They inspired trust through courageous acts, organized the resistance from the ground up, outmaneuvered their occupiers, and provided a vision for a better future.² These leaders did not do all the work alone, but they did lead significant aspects of their struggle from a path of resistance – not a path geared toward base subsistence.

Palestinian society has had leaders of this nature at all levels throughout history, and many are remembered as martyrs for the cause. The hegemonic powers in Palestine and their local allies, understanding the effectiveness of this form of leadership, have spared no effort to suppress it while incentivizing ineffective leadership models focused on a lack of agency and a willingness to compromise on values and basic rights. Three such efforts in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) are described below.

How Palestinian Leadership is Undermined from an Early Start

The ways in which the development of Palestinian leadership is undermined – and in particular that of youth leaders – can be clustered under misguided technocracy, paralyzing security, and institutional suppression.

A Technocratic Obsession

The PA and its international allies have focused on technocratic approaches to creating “youth leaders” and “experts” and bringing them into Palestinian government positions. Efforts such as municipal [youth councils](#)” and funded trips to the United States for “young leaders” to learn about American democracy can no doubt be an educational experience. However,

2. Many anti-colonial resistance leaders betrayed their values after liberation, creating authoritarian states. Although lessons to avoid that are central to the Palestinian struggle, Palestinians are still in the liberation phase – and as such optimal leadership at this moment is the focus of this piece.

they do not enable those young leaders to challenge the political status quo and the Israeli occupation or to build the effective transformative power that is needed at this stage.

A true transformation of leadership under the current Palestinian context must start from the bottom up.

Instead, these programs funnel some of the most capable young Palestinian women and men away from effective modes of resistance and into NGO-ized domains that lack true agency. Furthermore, they tie them to an individualistic economic trajectory that is personal, not communal, in nature or objective. Indeed, in some cases these programs “stain” participants with stamps of Western or PA approval that lessen the trust of their communities, thus isolating them and making them more dependent on outside actors. In other cases, impressionable participants in these programs subconsciously adopt a discourse and viewpoint that is far from their reality or local context, but is pleasing to diplomats and foreign audiences.

By so doing, these young leaders naïvely surrender their agency and national narrative in the belief that dialogue with Western governments will help them serve that Palestinian cause. They lack an understanding of how international politics function: Most diplomats are aware that Israel has built an apartheid-like system that violates the basics of international law even though they may not articulate it until they retire.³ Nonetheless, the international community does not act to shift the status quo because the balance of interests and power is not in the Palestinians’ favor. Although public opinion is important, it does not on its own define policy toward this conflict.

Despite this understanding, the majority of international actors avoid supporting or even recommending that

3. One example is former French Ambassador to the US Gérard Araud, [who said](#) just before the end of his tenure, “The status quo is extremely comfortable for Israel because they [can] have the[ir] cake and eat it. They have the West Bank, but at the same time they don’t have to make the painful decision about the Palestinians – really making them really, totally stateless or making them citizens of Israel. They won’t make them citizens of Israel, so they will have to make it official – which is – we know the situation, which is an apartheid. There will be officially an apartheid state. They are, in fact, already.”

Palestinians build any real local power to level the playing field or increase the cost of the occupation through resistance because of the political cost and the implications for their nation’s alliance with Israel and its powerful lobby groups. Today, most Western states refuse to even support modest nonviolent efforts seeking to ban illegal settlement products entering their markets, often despite public support within these states for such steps.

Thus, foreign actors and their Palestinian intermediaries want young leaders they can mold, rather than those who will challenge the boundaries that have been predefined for them. There are, of course, some exceptions among diplomats who seek to engage speakers that can challenge the perceptions of their superiors. Yet these remain rare exceptions to the rule.

This process has been unfolding for the last 27 years, allowing for the rise of a “middle generation” of Palestinian technocrats who speak foreign languages fluently and know how to charm foreign dignitaries, but are ineffective at using any of their skills to achieve transformational change in their communities in the pursuit of freedom and justice. Furthermore, there has been a resurgence in projects targeting youth in the last few years, not just in Palestine but across the Middle East, as a means of injecting an American-centric neoliberal discourse into the region’s youth bulge – which is focused on economic subsistence and not on political freedom.

Security in the Interest of Elites

The continued international financial and logistical support for the Palestinian security sector cements the hegemony of a subset of Palestinian elites who are willing to implement Israel’s security demands. The relations built between foreign actors and top security leaders during foreign training programs are designed to eradicate any revolutionary elements within the ranks of the Palestinian security forces.

Mechanisms of training in oppression range from simulated threats that make no distinction between violence and dissent among protestors to the use of films such as *Master and Commander*, whose plot

concerns the Napoleonic wars, instead of political films or films that apply to the local context, as experts on the Palestinian security sector have confided in me. Indeed, the film *Invictus*, which chronicles Nelson Mandela and the South African experience, was banned from some trainings focused on teaching small unit commanders' leadership skills.

In addition to promoting collaboration with the occupying forces, these programs reinforce the view that imposing order on one's own citizenry through violence is a legitimate way to maintain civic order. Palestinians pursuing acts of resistance against the occupier [become, in the eyes of these security forces](#), "destabilizing actors that must be surveilled and, eventually, punished."

Relatedly, Israel, the US, certain Arab regimes, and some Western governments have used the security forces' ability to prevent democratic processes in Palestine as an opportunity to fill Palestinian government institutions and the elite economic strata with a generation of "political figures," "businessmen," or "influencers" who are either risk averse or antagonistic to any form of resistance to the occupation because of their own personal interests. The practices of Israel and other external forces range from arrests and assassinations to distributing financial resources, allowing certain businesses to flourish, such as Rawabi, and inviting individuals to track II diplomatic engagements. These are just some examples of the diverse array of tactics used to, directly or indirectly, alter the terrain of Palestinian leadership and agency using coercive security apparatuses. In particular, these practices prevent a new generation of leaders from emerging.

However, it is important to note that not all security force cadres and elites have been co-opted by this form of *rentier-ism*, particularly given the increasing corruption they see in the ruling class. As informed observers of the Palestinian scene can attest, there are heated internal debates about the role of the security forces in future chapters of the Palestinian struggle; these observers highlight the disaster that could be caused by the dueling loyalties among Fatah leaders within these forces, especially if Palestinian society does not align on a new model of unified struggle in pursuit of liberation.

Institutional Political Suppression

Political factions in Palestinian society are also complicit in curbing the rise of young leaders. Although all Palestinian political parties have their own affiliated youth movements, their internal workings are driven by [patronage networks and kinship ties](#) rather than shared political beliefs or vision. In available polling on youth opinion and participation in political parties, 73% of those between the ages of 18 and 35 reported having no affiliation, 62% said they lacked trust in any political faction, and 80% claimed to support the creation of an independent youth party.⁴

Yet elections on university campuses often see Fatah and Hamas take home the largest proportion of votes in the face of little, if any, competition. Few groups have challenged the two dominant parties, and those who have sought to create independent movements have often found themselves restricted by student councils, university administrations, and the security forces. This is not to mention the enormous amount of money political parties spend to win these campus elections, as well as the interest that the PA's as well as Hamas's security forces take in recruiting and co-opting promising leaders.

In fact, most students choose sides based on their family ties or patronage links and distance themselves from party politics in all but name, especially given the lack of opportunity to rise within a party's ranks. Indeed, most political party leaders disdain younger party members because they are apt to be critical of their superiors' risk averseness and authoritarianism.⁵ Parties often pay youth minimal wages to undertake rote party activities and use them as media props, blocking them from playing more substantive roles. The response has been a mass exodus by youth from party structures.

While some former party members join independent youth groups that may be aligned with their old party's values and philosophy but are independent in decision making and organizing, the majority become depoliticized. Thus vast reservoirs of energy and leadership potential evaporate, leaving large parts of society disengaged, misinformed, and disconnected.

4. As this poll dates back to 2011 there is clearly a need for more up-to-date polling.

5. My contacts across political parties in Palestine speak of how they were mocked or silenced when they suggested even the slightest policy change. Those youth who toe the party line and assist the leader – often by helping them become tech-savvy – will receive kudos but only rise to a limited level.

The three ways in which Palestinian leadership is undermined – technocratic obsession, security and violence in the interest of elites, and institutional political suppression – are interwoven and are now invisible pillars of the systematic oppression of the occupation. They crush organic leadership and create an artificial and ineffective layer of “leaders” that are wedded to the status quo. It may therefore seem that resistance and change are futile, if not outright impossible, pursuits in Palestinian society today. Yet this conclusion is defeatist and inaccurate.

The Potential for a New Generation of Transformative Leadership

As noted above, in contexts of colonial control and military oppression, leaders blossom through acts focused on strategic resistance. In the Palestinian context, one can envision a new generation of leaders committed to the cause of freedom and justice who decide on the path of resistance and struggle from the local societal level to the broader institutional level – from the streets

of Ramallah and Haifa, the valleys of Khan Al-Ahmar, the plains of Al-Araqib, the skyscrapers of the diaspora, and the alleys of refugee camps, building higher levels of trust within their communities and reinvigorating hope.

Although this will not be an easy feat, models of leadership through resistance have happened before, during the Palestinians’ hundred years of struggle, from the 1936-39 uprising to the creation of guerrilla groups and the invigoration of the PLO in the 1960s, which forced Palestine and the Palestinians on to the world stage in the 1970s, leading to the development of the First Intifada in the 1980s and its launch in 1988, to cite just some examples. It is also worth citing the path that the Palestinians who remained on their land in 1948 have traveled, from a crushed, colonized minority to disrupting the status quo through the Land Day protests, and increasingly becoming a political force to be reckoned with.

All these efforts created networks of political consciousness and steadfastness that gained trust and expanded the vision and path of ethical resistance to



a point where their legitimacy and organizing power posed severe challenges to the political status quo.

Unfortunately, in the last 30 years, these networks have largely crumbled or lost relevance. Consequently, there is a necessity to build a new model that reinvigorates the best of the old models while also innovating for the current political context.

Palestinians, regardless of where they live, are not as divided in their vision of the future as is often assumed.

Drawing on the lessons of the Palestinians' own history as well as that of other movements for rights, it is clear that while actors can and should act in their communities, a level of broader coordination is necessary. This requires building a tiered system of leadership in which the detention or incapacitation of one person does not result in the breakdown of the movement. It also means eschewing competition between egos or the pursuit of power for power's sake, setting the mission of a free Palestine and justice as the metric for decision making.

Such a leadership network should be capable of wielding discursive power through trustworthy stories and narrative that define the movement with a unifying vision of what is possible. This is a challenging task because the fragmentation of Palestinians has also led to a fragmentation of a unified vision and has created a localization of struggles. The perception of liberation for Palestinians living in the US or Europe, for instance, is significantly different than for those who have undergone generations of confinement, poor living conditions, and the absence of basic human rights in the refugee camps. Even within the OPT, the means to freedom and justice for Bedouin communities in the peripheral areas of East Jerusalem are, for example, different than that of a young entrepreneur in Hebron.

Yet Palestinians, regardless of where they live, are not as divided in their vision of the future as is often assumed. At their core, Palestinians find unity in the belief and objective of achieving freedom, justice, and dignity for all living in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean

Sea, as well as for the Palestinian refugees and exiles, and understand that this vision requires sustained struggle and sacrifice. It is in the technical aspects of what such a solution or what the end state would look like where disagreements arise, but for now the one or two-state parameters are moot, as neither is possible in the short term and neither is possible without building real power first.

In fact, there is a current sense of relief in avoiding the shallow one-state/two-state debate. Instead, one finds excitement in discussions about rebuilding networks of leadership through resistance, shifting the balance of power, and constructing an authentic vision for the future from the ground up.

How can this sort of dynamic be practically initiated? It starts with a small spark of agency and persistence in small groups, or even in individuals, willing to organize ever larger groups through sustained and credible acts of resistance and public service.⁶

Eventually, if enough people from the different spheres of Palestinian existence pursue their agency and purposefully build communities of effective and strategic resistance, a wide web of networks of resistance will emerge. As these actors begin to emerge, it will then be their responsibility to organically define themselves around a common-denominator vision and smart coordinating tactics that resist suppression. Slowly, they would build trust through their work – and also healthy diversity in thought and experiences. One need only imagine the potential of organized groups of people in every village, university, civil society organization, city, refugee camp, and social justice movement taking the initiative to move in this direction of effectual resistance, building joint credibility through action.

Although such an endeavor requires risk and sacrifice, the agency it revives holds the key to the transformation of Palestinian politics.

6. Author's note: The author encourages young Palestinians interested in delving deeper into what this organizing looks like to contact him via his social media links.



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A LEADERSHIP MODEL FROM THE PALESTINIAN DIASPORA IN THE US

By Dana El Kurd

This paper will discuss a model of Palestinian activism initiated by the Palestinian diaspora in the US. The aim is to glean lessons on new leadership models from groups that have succeeded in organizing effectively and whose experience can serve the Palestinian people more broadly. Diaspora here is used to refer to Palestinians that live outside historic Palestine, which according to [some estimates](#) include almost half of the overall Palestinian population.¹

1. The number of Palestinian Americans is not fully clear. Some estimates from studies conducted in the 1980s cite a figure as large as 250,000; however, the latest figures from the American Community Survey puts the number at 82,000 (based on self reporting). For more info see Kathleen Christison, "The American Experience: Palestinians in the U.S.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, 4 (1989): 18–36 as well as Carlos Cortés, *Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 1670-1671.

The Palestinian diaspora in the US is of course not a monolith, and models of activism differ from region to region, state to state, and even city to city. The struggles of any particular community are highly contextualized, and groups have to respond accordingly. As such, in the space provided here, it would be impossible to do a holistic accounting of all the various forms of organizing that occur in the American diaspora. However, it is useful to examine the evolution of selected groups. One key group that has amassed enough cross-country support to organize national – and transnational – events is the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM).

This is also by no means an accounting of all groups with a national audience, but it represents a leadership model that is important to consider. For example, groups at the

university level such as Students for Justice in Palestine are undoubtedly very active and successful models in many cases, but fall outside the scope of this assessment. Organizing at the college level has different constraints and considerations, and the lessons learned would be less generalizable to the Palestinian people at large.



The Palestinian Youth Movement: From US to Transnational

The [Palestinian Youth Movement](#) (originally the Palestinian Youth Network) began in 2006, bringing together 35 activists from around the world for a meeting in Barcelona.² This network was intended to represent the variations of Palestinian lived experiences, from the diaspora to Palestinians in historic Palestine in an attempt to chart a path away from the stagnation imposed by the Oslo Accords. As one of the original members puts it, the network “wanted to examine the dilemmas and struggles for Palestinian youth across different geographies” to figure out “how to move forward.”

Many of these original members were driven by the realization that, despite their commitment – both

2. Data for this portion comes from interviews with a founding member of PYM, Loubna Qutami, as well as participants of their summer school program. Qutami has [written a dissertation](#) on the movement.

ideological and material – to the Palestinian cause, their work in NGO sectors and humanitarian groups did not constitute “political work,” and was not providing the space to capitalize on the global connections among Palestinian youth in various parts of the diaspora. And, to these members, the issues of youth empowerment within the infrastructure of Palestinian national politics were part and parcel of the Palestinian crisis. They were not antagonistic to the traditional forms of activism that came before, and were willing to apply lessons where suitable, but there was no dogma attached to keeping traditional forms of activism for tradition’s sake. In the words of one member, this gave people “an emotional investment” in the success of the network.

In 2007 the network coordinated with the General Union of Palestinian Students to put together a conference in France which brought together 100 participants. This initiative led to the founding general assembly meeting, held in Madrid in 2008; 28 members representing 28 different countries ratified the general assemblies. The group had enough momentum to launch, with over 150 attendees and 33 countries represented at that meeting. Thus began the work of creating an international network through the use of summer camps and political education campaigns, reaching over a thousand youths in over 30 countries.

Centering youth is key to maintaining enthusiasm and vibrancy in the movement for Palestinian rights.

With the Arab uprisings, the Palestinian Youth Network made a conscious decision to relaunch as the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) at the 2011 general assembly in Istanbul. This modification was accompanied by many structural changes including opening up the membership to Arab members. Given the promise of the “Arab Spring,” PYM reassessed the importance of the Arab dimension to the Palestinian struggle. In particular, the movement weighed how the Arab uprisings could provide new opportunities for Palestine as well as how Palestinians could support and participate in the transformations across the region, with the objective of making the Arab world itself a key arena for future activism.

But, as we all know, this optimism was short lived. Subsequent general assembly meetings and conferences were much more divided, as members fragmented around issues such as the revolution in Syria, as well as how to deal with the increased repression they faced in their home countries. By the 2014 Amman meeting, the decision was made to cease international activities so that each chapter could focus on facing the challenges in their particular context.

Renewed Focus on the US

Thereafter, PYM became more active in the US specifically while other chapters struggled to maintain momentum. Until 2015, PYM was mainly organizing out of the Bay Area in California, in addition to a chapter in San Diego. But, following a summer school initiative in 2015, PYM was able to launch chapters in multiple cities around the US. Since then, these chapters have focused on three main objectives: building healthy local Arab communities through cultural programs and social services; connecting the national with the international dimensions of Palestinian struggle by rekindling bonds between Palestinian and Arab youth; and connecting with other communities, such as Black and indigenous communities, in their local struggles.

As one member puts it, PYM was successful in weathering significant storms and tumultuous political climates precisely because it remained dynamic, and attempted to integrate solutions to problems that arose with every iteration of the movement. For instance, after the first conference, the founding members noticed that “authenticity issues” arose, with disagreements among youth from different places on who was more representative of Palestine and Palestinian issues. To resolve these tensions, PYM made sure that their next summer program (Syria in 2009) was precisely focused on issues of identity. And, as with every voluntary organization, leadership at PYM emerged organically depending on people’s level of commitment to the work of each project. Each assembly meeting would come to certain objectives, and ask for volunteers from among the participants to take the lead on follow-up committees.

Between 2009 and 2014 the leaders of PYM from the US, who were integrated in the PYM international group, were more connected to older, traditional Palestinian diaspora institutions. Today, the new

leadership of PYM is not only much younger, but also less connected to traditional Palestinian activism. They are thus able to be more innovative in the targets of their campaigns and activities. For example, with the objective of making connections to ally communities, PYM has sent delegations to Standing Rock and led a delegation of indigenous youth to Palestine in 2018, making inroads with the indigenous rights movement in the US. They also sent a delegation to South Africa in April 2019 in partnership with the Afro-Middle East Center, thereby connecting the Palestinian struggle to other movements in new and interesting ways. The PYM has also consciously pursued a volunteer-based model despite its challenges because it does not want to fall into the NGO trap, with all of the vested interests it produces.

The Palestinian Youth Movement has been successful in weathering significant storms and tumultuous political climates because it has remained dynamic.

This dynamic and responsive model has proven to be successful, in the sense that PYM has effectively launched a number of programs, such as the Ghassan Kanafani art scholarship to support youth interest in Palestinian culture and identity, the “popular university” initiatives, and refugee support work in Greece and in San Diego, California in order to connect the struggle of the Palestinian refugee to the cause of refugee rights worldwide.

The lessons we can learn from this case study are important. First, it is crucial to recognize the variations in lived experience, and allow the space for Palestinians in different contexts to organize and address the challenges they face in their own environments without imposing blanket solutions. This allowed the PYM to rebrand after several of the Arab uprisings were crushed, and to maintain continuity despite the obstacles. Second, centering youth is key to maintaining enthusiasm and vibrancy in the movement. It is clearly unproductive to reproduce the same forms of organizing that may have worked in previous time periods for the sake of tradition, without critical assessment about whether such strategies are still useful. Putting youth issues at the forefront, and youth in leadership positions, is imperative.



ACCOUNTABILITY: THE PLO’S BRIDGE FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE

By Marwa Fatafta

At this time of the COVID-19 pandemic that is causing great personal hardship, loss of human life, and financial chaos across the globe, and with Israel on the brink of annexing some or all of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), the Palestinian people must transform crisis into opportunity. Rather than wait for Israel to slowly strangle the Palestinian Authority (PA) that was established by the Oslo Accords, it is past time to delink the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from the PA and work to restore the PLO’s mandate, representativity, and accountability to the people it claims to represent.

Can we envisage a system of leadership and accountability that enables Palestinians to contribute

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

The Myth of Representation

The principal mission of the PLO as the “sole legitimate representative” of the Palestinian people is to represent all Palestinians across fragmented

geographies and ideological lines. In its early years, the PLO spearheaded the national liberation movement and succeeded in bringing the Palestinian resistance factions under one umbrella following the defeat of 1967. It also created community structures and associations in refugee camps, Palestinian diaspora community organizations, and major development institutions.

This approach kept the PLO going from the 1960s to the 1980s, with several notable successes along the way, including re-establishing the Palestinians as a people globally recognized as such, with the PLO as their sole legitimate representative. Yet self-determination and justice have not been fulfilled, and there has been no accountability for that failure either under the late Yasser Arafat's leadership or that of Mahmoud Abbas. Rather, even now, the discussion of the current leadership crisis remains hostage to personalities. The frequently asked question is: What happens after Mahmoud Abbas? This not only reflects the personalized nature of the Palestinian leadership but also dismisses the Palestinian polity from the equation.

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

The original purpose of mobilizing Palestinian communities was the struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Article 11 of the [Palestinian National Charter](#) (1968) stated that “the Palestinians will have three mottos: national unity (Wihda Wataniyya), national mobilization (Ta’bi’a Qawmiyya), and liberation (Tahreer).” This mission gave the PLO a solid source of legitimacy and power. However, its mandate began to be put into question once the Palestinian National Council (PNC) formally shifted the political strategy from the struggle for liberation of all of Palestine to a two-state solution at its 1988 meeting in Algiers.

The shift in PLO strategy has meant three things. First, by abandoning the struggle for liberation of all of Palestine and focusing on the goal of statehood,

the PLO moved its political weight and focus from the Palestinian diaspora and refugee communities to the OPT. This began the disconnect between the Palestinian people and their representative, which was further deepened by the failure of the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO in the 1990s and the creation of the PA.

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

There has never been as wide a gap between the Palestinian polity and the Palestinian leadership as there is today.

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

The agreement between the 12 Palestinian factions in 2005, known as [the Cairo Declaration](#), emphasized the need to reform the PLO based on consensus of all Palestinian factions. In fact, this is a mischaracterization of what reform means: It involved dividing the cake amongst Palestinian factions rather than enabling the Palestinian people to freely elect or select their representatives. It also assumed that Palestinian factions are as relevant a vehicle for political engagement as in the past.

Third, the initial social contract between the PLO and the Palestinian people was to mobilize Palestinians for

armed struggle and national liberation. The statehood project marked an abandonment of this goal for one in which Palestinians were to be served as “citizens” by their government. The PA provided the administrative, organizational, and political foundation – originally intended to be interim – on which the Palestinian leadership sought to build the future Palestinian state in the OPT on the 1967 borders. The influx of foreign aid ensured the PA’s place as the governor of the Palestinian people in the OPT and the de facto Palestinian representative in relations with Israel and the “peace process.” The relevance of the PLO to the national movement further diminished and the Palestinian communities in refugee camps and in the diaspora were increasingly marginalized.

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

A Path to Renewal?

At a time when there is a clear leadership vacuum, we must ask what should be done to bring the PLO back to relevance. First, and most importantly, the PLO must be completely delinked from the PA and second, accountability mechanisms must be instituted and play a major part in the functioning of the PLO.

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

to the PA after Oslo, the PLO was rendered largely impotent.

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

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

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

The PLO must be completely delinked from the PA and accountability mechanisms must be instituted and play a major part in the PLO’s functioning.

There are [three critical elements](#) for any accountability measure to be effective: *transparency* (making decisions, plans, and resources open for the public); *answerability* (representative leaders must provide justifications for their decisions to their people; and *enforceability* (there is a form of “punishment” when representatives fail, such as not being elected again or prosecuted by independent internal institutions). The implementation of these elements will require a democratic overhaul of the PLO mandate, institutions, and modus operandi.

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

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

Palestinian embassies and representative offices are often overlooked in this regard. The PLO's international status is still solid and has been strengthened since

the UN's recognition of Palestine as a non-member observer state in 2012. The embassies could contribute to reconstructing the sense of Palestinian communities wherever they have offices, for example by holding public hearings for Palestinians in the diaspora to engage on political developments on the ground and examine how the leadership is responding to them. In many postings, however, they might need to work hard to reach beyond members of the community who are closely aligned with Fatah and the PA leadership.

The Palestinian national circumstances are unique and therefore the question of leadership, representation, and accountability requires imagination and adaptability, particularly in the face of a fierce military occupation and discriminatory regime that denies the right of return for the refugees and equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel – a regime whose interest is to keep Palestinians, both people and leadership, fragmented and divided. Nevertheless, the contemporary history of the Palestinian people holds abundant examples of success in mass political organization and mobilization, such as the Palestinian uprising against the British mandate in 1936-39, the early years of the PLO itself, and the First Intifada. These and other experiences can serve as a reminder and a guiding compass of the Palestinian people's ability to shape their own future.



CONCLUSION: FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

The Palestinian national movement is at its lowest ebb since its launch in the 1960s. Yet such an acute crisis brings opportunities that must be grasped: That is the main message of the papers in this report and of the broader Policy Circle convened by Al-Shabaka.¹ The authors stress that the time is past due to reclaim the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the national representative of the Palestinian people, and that Palestinians must seek ways to reverse the steady encroachment on the PLO's leadership and resources by the Palestinian Authority (PA) created under the Oslo Accords – a PA that now oversees truncated pieces of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) as the draconian Israeli occupation forces illegally annex and settle the land.

1. This section draws on a background paper by Al-Shabaka Senior Policy Fellow Yara Hawari.

The premise underpinning the work of the Policy Circle is that, as hollowed out as the PLO is, the Palestinian people currently have no alternative but to reclaim it as their national representative. The authors are not blind to the decades of PLO failings and the organization's weaknesses today. They not only analyze some of the key causes but also propose doable solutions. Three of the papers have tackled the structure, functions, mission, and representativity of the PLO, thus providing a good grounding in the organization's challenges and potential. This sets the stage for the remaining papers to address the promise and challenges of youth leadership.

To begin with, Belal Shobaki skillfully traces the evolution of the Islamist movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both excluded from the PLO since their founding despite representing many Palestinians. He recalls the efforts finally made to bring them into the fold at the

Cairo convening of 2005, which resulted in the Cairo Declaration – which is yet to be implemented. It is useful to note that all the groups at the convening “believed that maintaining the PLO’s irrelevance was tantamount to political suicide.” Since that time, key documents by Hamas (in 2017) and Islamic Jihad (in 2018) call for rebuilding the PLO on democratic rather than Islamic grounds, further facilitating their integration.

Nijmeh Ali broadens the discussion to the need to secure, once again, the involvement of all Palestinians in their national movement. She recalls how this was achieved in the early years when the PLO’s representativity and legitimacy came through engagement and by decision-making through consensus rather than by voting. Ali depicts what she calls the PLO’s disengagement from the Palestinian people, initially the refugees and exiles in the diaspora (the PLO could not formally represent the Palestinian citizens of Israel) and eventually the Palestinians in the OPT. The urgent questions that need to be addressed concern the PLO’s political project and which Palestinians it seeks to represent. Until these core questions are resolved, attempts at reform will not achieve their intended objective.

The question of leadership is at the heart of Fadi Quran’s analysis. Rather than echo the sterile discussion of who will be the next leader, he insists that the transformation of Palestinian leadership requires rekindling a sense of agency in both individuals and communities, and thus expanding leadership across every level of society. Based on a review of how the present situation evolved, Quran draws on his experience as an organizer as well as examples from other revolutionary movements to propose the model of leadership that will best serve the cause. He terms this “leadership through resistance,” emphasizing that such resistance must be “moral, strategic, and effective.” However, youth leadership building programs often end up co-opting youth and undermining democratic leadership. There are many examples from Palestinian history and other movements to counter this. Most importantly, leadership will need to wield the discursive power of a narrative that defines the movement with a unifying vision of what is possible.

Quran’s essay is complemented by the analysis of a compelling example of youth leadership by Dana El Kurd, who has made a study of youth movements. In her

paper she zeroes in on the Palestinian Youth Movement, which launched in the US yet succeeded in building a transnational movement for some years before re-focusing on the US and establishing linkages with other US movements striving for rights and justice such as Black and Native American movements. Kurd’s analysis lead to some key findings, including the importance of recognizing the variations in lived experience so as to overcome obstacles, and of centering youth to maintain the vibrancy of a movement and its ability to grow.

Marwa Fatafta builds on all of the above. She points out that even if implemented the 2005 Cairo Declaration would merely divide the cake amongst the present 12 Palestinian factions rather than engage the people. She emphasizes the absence of any effective accountability mechanism during the PLO’s lengthy history despite the divisive decisions made on the people’s behalf. Fatafta issues a clarion call to delink the PLO from the PA and restore its mandate, something Israel’s attempts to strangle the Palestinians in the OPT makes not only imperative but possible. She also suggests some practical steps to achieve accountability.

This report comes at a critical moment. Israel is seeking to legalize its occupation of the territories it conquered in 1967 with the support of the US administration which, under President Donald Trump, has already recognized Israel’s annexation of Syria’s Golan Heights and approved Israeli plans for further annexation of the OPT. The Palestinian leadership rightly rejected the plan but continues to hold on to a political line (the Oslo parameters) that has led the Palestinian people to one of their most vulnerable points in history. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership is still misplacing its hopes in actors who have demonstrated over many decades that they do not have the political will to deliver on Palestinian rights.

It has never been more pressing to consider reclamation of the PLO as a leadership that is representative of the Palestinian people in all their geographic, social, and political realities. This report highlights the most urgent issues to be addressed in order to do so, including reconciliation between political factions, mechanisms of representation and accountability, and leadership models. Such steps can take us toward reclaiming the PLO and the goal of liberation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By Marwa Fatafta

This literature review provides further resources on issues of Palestinian leadership and accountability. Sources are grouped under six thematic sections: the Palestinian political system and institutions (the PA and the PLO); the Palestinian national movement and political elite; the PA state-building project; the current leadership crisis; corruption and accountability; and the Palestinian polity. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

The PA, PLO, and the Palestinian Political System(s)

“What is the PLO?” Rashid Hamid, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (1975):
https://www.jstor.org/stable/2535603?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

This article outlines the history of the PLO’s institutional development and provides insights into its organizational structure in the 1970s. The author sheds light on the PLO’s internal workings and its relation to Palestinian communities.

“PLO Institutions: The Challenge Ahead,” Jamil Hilal, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (1994):
<http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/39911>

This article lays the ground for the PLO’s reconstruction amid the challenges it faced at the onset of “final status” peace negotiations and the signing of the Oslo Accords.

“The Palestinian Elections: Moving Toward Democracy or One-Party Rule?,” Lamis Andoni, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (1995): <http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/40246>

In the context of the 1996 general elections, the author tackles the paradox of Palestinian elections as a democratic right and a vehicle for former President Yasser Arafat and his political faction Fatah to concentrate power and legitimize a political process that could well lead to the perpetuation of Israeli control.

“The Palestinian Legislative Council: A Critical Assessment,” Ziad Abu-Amr, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (1997):
https://www.jstor.org/stable/2537910?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Since its inauguration in March 1996, the Palestinian Legislative Council has failed to accomplish its two main objectives: enact substantive legislation and exercise oversight over the Executive Authority. The author, an elected member of the council, outlines reasons that he believes have contributed to its failure and analyzes the implications of this failure for the future of democracy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

“Struggle in a Post-Charisma Transition: Rethinking Palestinian Politics after Arafat,” Ali Jarbawi and Wendy Pearlman, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (2007): <https://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/abstract/41905>

Drawing on Max Weber's three kinds of legitimate domination, this article proposes the concept of "post-charisma transition" to describe the transformation of a political system in which authority is legitimated by a leader's personal stature. It examines Mahmoud Abbas's transition following the charismatic rule of Yasser Arafat, which rendered Abbas unable to govern the system that Arafat bequeathed him.

"Democratizing the PLO: Five Questions," Toufic Haddad, Al-Shabaka (2012):

<https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/democratizing-the-plo-five-questions/>

This commentary argues that democratizing the PLO to make it the voice of the Palestinian people is long overdue, and discusses five key factors that must be addressed to do so.

The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: From Oslo to Al-Aqsa, Nigel Parsons, Routledge (2012):

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Politics-of-the-Palestinian-Authority-From-Oslo-to-Al-Aqsa-1st-Edition/Parsons/p/book/9780415650991>

This book analyzes Palestinian internal politics and institutional building by looking at the transformation of the PLO from a liberation movement into a national authority, the PA.

"Beyond the Written Constitution: Constitutional Crisis of, and Institutional Deadlock in, the Palestinian Political System as Entrenched in the Basic Law," Asem Khalil, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*

(2013): <https://academic.oup.com/icon/article/11/1/34/776154>

In "Beyond the Written Constitution" the author argues that while the Palestinian leadership crisis reached a climax in 2007 with the armed clash between Fatah and Hamas, the historical roots of the conflict lie in the role of the Basic Law and constitutional arrangements – and thus they can help end it.

"Oslo's Roots: Kissinger, the PLO, and the Peace Process," Osamah Khalil, Al-Shabaka (2013):

<https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/oslos-roots-kissinger-plo-and-peace-process/>

The author draws on declassified US diplomatic documents to probe the roots of Oslo and argues that the PLO leadership, in particular key figures in Fatah, sought to establish a relationship with Washington at the expense of other Palestinian factions. He demonstrates that the PLO's willingness to make considerable concessions occurred before entering negotiations or being recognized by the US.

"Who Are You? The PLO and the Limits of Representation," Osamah Khalil, Al-Shabaka (2013):

<https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/who-are-you-plo-and-limits-representation/>

This policy brief argues that reforming the PLO will not lead to greater representation and accountability. The author contends that Palestinians must abandon the PLO and begin working to create a new representative body more suited to the challenges, needs, and opportunities of the 21st century.

"The (Quasi-) Political System of Palestine," Ghada alMadbouh, *Between State and Non-State: Politics and Society in Kurdistan-Iraq and Palestine*, Palgrave Macmillan (2017):

<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781349950652#aboutAuthors>

In this book chapter, the author argues that the Palestinian political system is quasi-political and thoroughly controlled by Israel on the basis of the Oslo Accords. She traces the system's development from the PLO

to the establishment of the PA to Salam Fayyad's state-building project following the death of Yasser Arafat. **"Mapping Palestinian Politics,"** European Council on Foreign Relations (2018):

https://www.ecfr.eu/mapping_palestinian_politics/

"Mapping Palestinian Politics" provides an interactive overview of the main Palestinian political institutions and actors in Palestine, Israel, and the diaspora. It is a resource for researchers, journalists, and policymakers who seek to understand who is who in Palestinian politics.

The Palestinian National Movement and Political Elite

"The Road to Palestinian Sovereignty: Problematic Structure or Conventional Obstacles?," Shibley Telhami, *Problematic Sovereignty: Contested Rules and Political Possibilities*, Columbia University Press (2001):

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/kras12178>

Countering the common view of sovereignty as one coherent set of principles, the book in which this chapter is published illustrates cases where the disaggregation of sovereignty has enabled political actors to create entities that are semiautonomous, semi-independent, and/or semi-legal. The author argues that while the PA has no legal sovereignty over limited territories, it maintains Westphalian and domestic sovereignty.

"The Three Faces/Phases of Palestinian Nationalism, 1948-2005," Helga Baumgarten, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (2005): <https://jps.ucpress.edu/content/34/4/25.full.pdf+html>

This article takes a comparative look at the three main manifestations of Palestinian nationalism since 1948: the Movement of Arab Nationalists, Fatah, and Hamas. It traces the origins of the three movements, their differing ideologies, and the points of similarity and contrast among them.

"The New Palestinian Globalized Elite," Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabari, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (2005): <http://www.palestine-studies.org/jq/fulltext/77932>

Based on empirical research and interviews conducted prior to and after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, this article examines the relationship between Palestinian NGOs, international NGOs, and donors as determined by the processes within Palestinian society, as well as by mechanisms and structural relations within the aid community.

The Palestinian National Movement: Politics of Contention 1967-2005, Amal Jamal, Indiana University Press (2005): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2005rh7>

This book delves into the Palestinian political elite – their fragmentation, competition, and role in the development of the Palestinian national movement following 1967. It also considers the PLO's role in coordinating dissent and resistance against the Israeli occupation.

"The Polarization of the Palestinian Political Field," Jamil Hilal, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (2010):

<https://jps.ucpress.edu/content/39/3/24.abstract>

The author argues that the polarization of the Palestinian political field did not begin with Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007. He analyzes the factors that had already eroded the cohesiveness and vitality of the Palestinian polity, namely the paralysis of Palestinian political institutions, territorial and social fragmentation, and egregious outside interference.

Palestinians Politics after Arafat: A Failed National Movement, As'ad Ghanem, Indiana University Press (2011):
<https://iupress.org/9780253004017/palestinian-politics-after-arafat/>

In *Palestinian Politics after Arafat*, the author analyzes the Palestinian national movement and the internal and external conditions that led to its fragmentation and failure to establish a Palestinian state after the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004.

“Who Owns ‘The Spring’ in Palestine? Rethinking Popular Consent and Resistance in the Context of the ‘Palestinian State’ and the ‘Arab Spring,’” Philip Leech, *Democratization* (2014):

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13510347.2014.899584?tokenDomain=eprints&tokenAccess=YEfBYM5esJUderTj793I&forwardService=showFullText&doi=10.1080%2F13510347.2014.899584&doi=10.1080%2F13510347.2014.899584&journalCode=fdem20>

This article identifies patterns of the PA's authoritarianism, particularly in the areas of security and policing, the Palestinian population's deprivation of access to basic resources, and the wider issue of the continued absence of Palestinian sovereignty.

“The Emergence of Palestinian Mughtaribûn: Diaspora Politics and State-Building in Oslo Palestine,” Xavier Guignard, *Mashriq and Mahjar: Journal of Middle East Migration Studies* (2016):

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01321695/document>

This article considers the role of the second generation of Palestinian returnees in the state-building project after Oslo as well as the complex historical relationship between power and exile in the Palestinian national movement.

“Revitalizing Palestinian Nationalism: Options Versus Realities,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2017):
http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Palestinian_Nationalism_Web.pdf

This report offers policy alternatives to overcome the Palestinian leadership and national movement crisis and to inject new life into Palestinian institutions. It also presents the results of a survey of 58 Palestinian leaders in various fields on their views on social and political trends and on the shape and future direction of Palestinian nationalism.

“The Fragmentation of the Palestinian Political Field: Sources and Ramifications,” Jamil Hilal, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* (2018):

https://caa.ucpress.edu/content/11/12/185?utm_source=TrendMD&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Contemporary_Arab_Affairs_TrendMD_0

This article focuses on the Palestinian political field as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s, the beginnings of its fragmentation in the 1990s, and its almost complete collapse in the first decade of the 21st century.

The Palestinian State-Building Project

“Armed Struggle and State Formation,” Yezid Sayigh, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (1997):
https://www.jstor.org/stable/2537904?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

The author highlights how armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine has been a rallying cry of the Palestinian national movement since the 1960s, though its results have been marginal. Instead, military groups have served a primarily political function, offering Palestinians in the diaspora organizational structures for political expression and state building. He further argues that the PLO as an exile entity attempting to unite a disparate diaspora has necessarily resulted in an authoritarian leadership.

Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993, Yezid Sayigh, Oxford (2000):

<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198296430.001.0001/acprof-9780198296430>

Armed Struggle and the Search for State spans the history of the contemporary Palestinian national movement, from the establishment of Israel in 1948 to the Oslo Accords of 1993. Contrary to the conventional view that national liberation movements proceed with state-building only after attaining independence, the author argues that the case of the PLO shows that state-building may shape political institutionalization, even in the absence of an autonomous territorial, economic, and social base.

State Formation in Palestine: Viability and Governance During a Social Transformation, Inge Amundsen, George Giacaman, and Mushtaq Khan, Routledge (2004):

<https://www.routledge.com/State-Formation-in-Palestine-Viability-and-Governance-during-a-Social/Amundsen-Giacaman-Khan/p/book/9780415338011>

This book challenges the prevalent view that the PA’s state project collapsed because of its internal governance failures, its lack of commitment to democracy, and corruption. It argues that the analytical framework of “good governance” is not appropriate for assessing state performance in developing countries, and that it is especially inappropriate in conflict and post-conflict situations. Instead, the authors suggest an alternative framework showing that the institutional architecture set up by Oslo was responsible for many of the serious failures.

“Are Palestinians Building a State?” Nathan J. Brown, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2010):
http://carnegieendowment.org/files/palestinian_state1.pdf

This commentary argues that Salam Fayyad failed to accomplish his ambitious state-building plan. The author further asserts that despite the common perception, Fayyad did not build more institutions than Arafat did, and that even if he made those institutions more efficient, they lost their legitimacy in an authoritarian context.

“Fayyad is Not the Problem, but Fayyadism is Not the Solution to Palestine’s Political Crisis,” Nathan J. Brown, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2010):

http://carnegieendowment.org/files/fayyad_not_problem_2.pdf

This commentary provides a critical assessment of Salam Fayyad's state-building program and why it is bound to fail, much to the dislike of the international community and supporters of Fayyad's agenda.

“Policing the People, Building the State: Authoritarian Transformation in the West Bank and Gaza,” Yezid Sayigh, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2011):

http://carnegieendowment.org/files/gaza_west_bank_security.pdf

The author analyzes the authoritarian transformation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by examining Salam Fayyad's reforms of the PA's security forces as well as Hamas's security reforms in Gaza. He argues that the structuring and rebuilding of these forces largely ignored democratic governance and rule of law reform.

The Palestinian Leadership Crisis, Corruption, and Accountability

“Clientelist Politics: State Formation and Corruption in Palestine 1994-2000,” Inge Amundsen and Basem Ezbidi, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2002): <https://open.cmi.no/cmi-xmlui/handle/11250/2435883>

This report argues that though the authoritarian traits of the PA could have led to a distinct developmentalist state, they pushed the PA into corrupt, clientelist practices and fragmentation.

“The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics,” Rex Brynen, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (2005): https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538102?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

This article challenges the argument that the nepotism and corruption of the Palestinian leadership is rooted in an Arab-Palestinian political culture that is more inclined to patronage than institution building. The author focuses instead on the leadership's neopatrimonial use of resources to hold together a dominant political coalition.

“Appointments and Promotions in Diplomatic Posts,” AMAN Coalition for Transparency and Accountability (2016): <https://www.aman-palestine.org/en/reports-and-studies/5983.html>

This document outlines AMAN's study that reviewed diplomatic posts in Palestine in terms of recruitment and promotion and identified the challenges that lie ahead.

“The Palestinian Leadership Crisis,” Khalid Elgindy, Brookings Institution (2016): <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/01/05/the-palestinian-leadership-crisis/>

“The Palestinian Leadership Crisis” sheds light on the “third intifada” and what it means for the Palestinian political leadership. It argues that while the anger that fueled the violence is rooted in Israel's occupation and the failed peace process, it also reflects the Palestinians' deep-seated frustration with their own leadership.

“Neopatrimonialism, Corruption, and the Palestinian Authority: Pathways to Real Reform,” Marwa Fatafta, Al-Shabaka (2018):

<https://al-shabaka.org/circles/neopatrimonialism-corruption-and-the-palestinian-authority-pathways-to-real-reform/>

This policy brief examines the PA's neopatrimonial nature, meaning that the PA is based on clientele networks, patronage, and loyalty to the ruling party Fatah rather than meritocracy, and proposes policy recommendations for reform.

“The Problem of Legitimacy for the Palestinian Authority,” Yousef Munayyer, Arab Center Washington (2018): http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-problem-of-legitimacy-for-the-palestinian-authority/

This commentary examines the Palestinian people's growing frustration with their leadership following the PA's economic sanctions on the Gaza Strip.

“Corruption in Service Delivery in the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” Transparency International (2018): <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/helpdesk/Corruption-in-service-delivery-in-the-occupied-Palestinian-territories-2017.pdf>

This report sheds light on the main challenges to governance and anti-corruption efforts in Palestine, offering a brief overview of the extent of corruption and its main drivers, as well as how governance challenges affect areas of service delivery such as health, education, electricity, and water supply.

Hamas, Fatah, and the Palestinian Political Division

Political Parties in Palestine: Leadership and Thought, Michael Bröning, Palgrave Macmillan (2013): <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137296924>

This book examines the fractious Palestinian political scene, providing a comprehensive discussion of the ideological outlook, historical development, and political objectives of all of Palestine's major political factions.

Hamas: Political Thought and Practice, Khaled Hroub, Institute for Palestine Studies (2014): <https://store.palestine-studies.org/books/hamas-political-thought-and-practice-1>

This in-depth study of Hamas analyzes its historical, ideological, and operational dimensions. It traces the genesis of the movement during the First Intifada, examines its political formation, and presents its evolving attitude toward the struggle with Israel. The author also discusses Hamas's relations with the PLO and other actors on the Palestinian political scene as well as Arab and international actors.

“Palestinian Reconciliation and the Potential of Transitional Justice,” Mia Swart, Brookings Institution (2019): <https://www.brookings.edu/research/palestinian-reconciliation-and-the-potential-of-transitional-justice/>

This article addresses the concepts of transitional justice and reconciliation in the case of Palestine, and examines to what extent the transitional justice framework and its mechanisms can apply to intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

The Palestinian Polity (Focus on Gender and Youth)

“Engendering State-Building: The Women’s Movement and Gender-Regime in Palestine,” Amal Jamal, *Middle East Journal* (2001): https://www.jstor.org/stable/4329617?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

This article discusses the Palestinian women’s movement and its attempt to influence policymaking and improve the legal status of women in the emerging state. The author argues that a broad political coalition of democratic forces in Palestinian society is needed if any real change in women’s status is to take place.

“Des Accords d’Oslo à la Seconde Intifâda: L’Espace Public Palestinien en Question,” Bernard Botiveau, *Études Rurales* (2005): https://journals.openedition.org/etudesrurales/8143#xd_co_f=YmE5YjYzNGQtMzRjOC00YTcwLTgwNzUtN-TA0NTg1ODJkZmYy~

This article examines how the notion of public space has been used to study contemporary Arab societies and how it helps to capture recent changes in political life in Palestine. The examples developed relate in particular to personal status, the participation of women in political debate, the issue of corruption, and electoral behavior.

“Palestinians in Latin America: Between Assimilation and Long-Distance Nationalism,” Cecilia Baeza, *Journal of Palestine Studies* (2014): <https://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/162937>

Latin America is host to an estimated 500,000 people of Palestinian descent, the largest such population outside the Arab world. Focusing on Chile, this article presents an historical overview of the Palestinian immigrant community in Latin America, demonstrating its diverse and dynamic identity politics.

“Fatah from Below: The Clash of Generations in Palestine,” Jacob Høigilt, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13530194.2015.1116375?needAccess=true>

The PA’s authoritarianism, factionalism, and accommodating policy vis-à-vis the Israeli occupation has resulted in alienation and dissatisfaction among Palestinian youth. The article argues that this has led to two trends: a well-organized but leaderless popular resistance, and spontaneous, destructive outbursts of violence.

“The Future of Palestine: Youth Views on the Two-State Paradigm,” European Council on Foreign Relations (2019): https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_future_of_palestine_youth_views_on_the_two_state_paradigm

This is a collection of Palestinian writers sharing their views on the future of the two-state solution 25 years after the Oslo Accords.

ANNEX I: BRIEF BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE OF THE PLO

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was launched in Jerusalem in 1964 following a call from the Arab League summit in Cairo to create an organization that represented the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian National Council (PNC) adopted the National Charter in 1964 and revised it in 1968. In 1974, the Arab League and the United Nations General Assembly officially recognized the PLO as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

In 1988, the PNC endorsed a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel and [amended the PLO Charter](#) to comply with its acceptance of the Oslo peace process and its recognition of Israel.

In 2012, the United Nations General Assembly enhanced the status of Palestine at the UN, [according it](#) non-member observer state status, which enabled it to sign UN treaties. This step was taken “without prejudice to the acquired rights, privileges and role of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the United Nations as the representative of the Palestinian people.”

Three main bodies constitute the PLO (for a comprehensive mapping of Palestinian politics and institutions see [here](#) in English and [here](#) and [here](#) in Arabic.)

1. The Palestinian National Council (PNC)

The PNC is the PLO’s legislative authority and is considered the highest decision-making body of the organization. It is responsible for formulating the organization’s policies and must be convened for any changes in the Charter. It acts as the Palestinians’ parliament-in-exile and represents all Palestinians, except for the Palestinian citizens of Israel. The PNC is said to [comprise 747 members](#) (other [estimates](#) suggest that the [current](#) number of members is 794) from Palestine and the diaspora. The composition of the PNC is intended to represent all sectors of the

Palestinian people worldwide, including political parties and popular organizations (which are assigned specific quotas), as well as independent personalities, including intellectuals, religious leaders, and the business sector.

The Palestinian people are meant to directly elect the PNC, and the electoral system was set out in 1965. Article 5 of the PLO’s [Basic Law declares](#) “The members of the national Council shall be elected by the Palestinian people by direct ballot, in accordance with a system to be devised for this purpose by the Executive Committee.” Article 6 [states that](#) “Should it be impossible to hold an election to the National Council, the National Council shall continue to sit until circumstances permit of the holding of elections.” In fact no elections – in the way stipulated by the Basic Law – have ever been held.

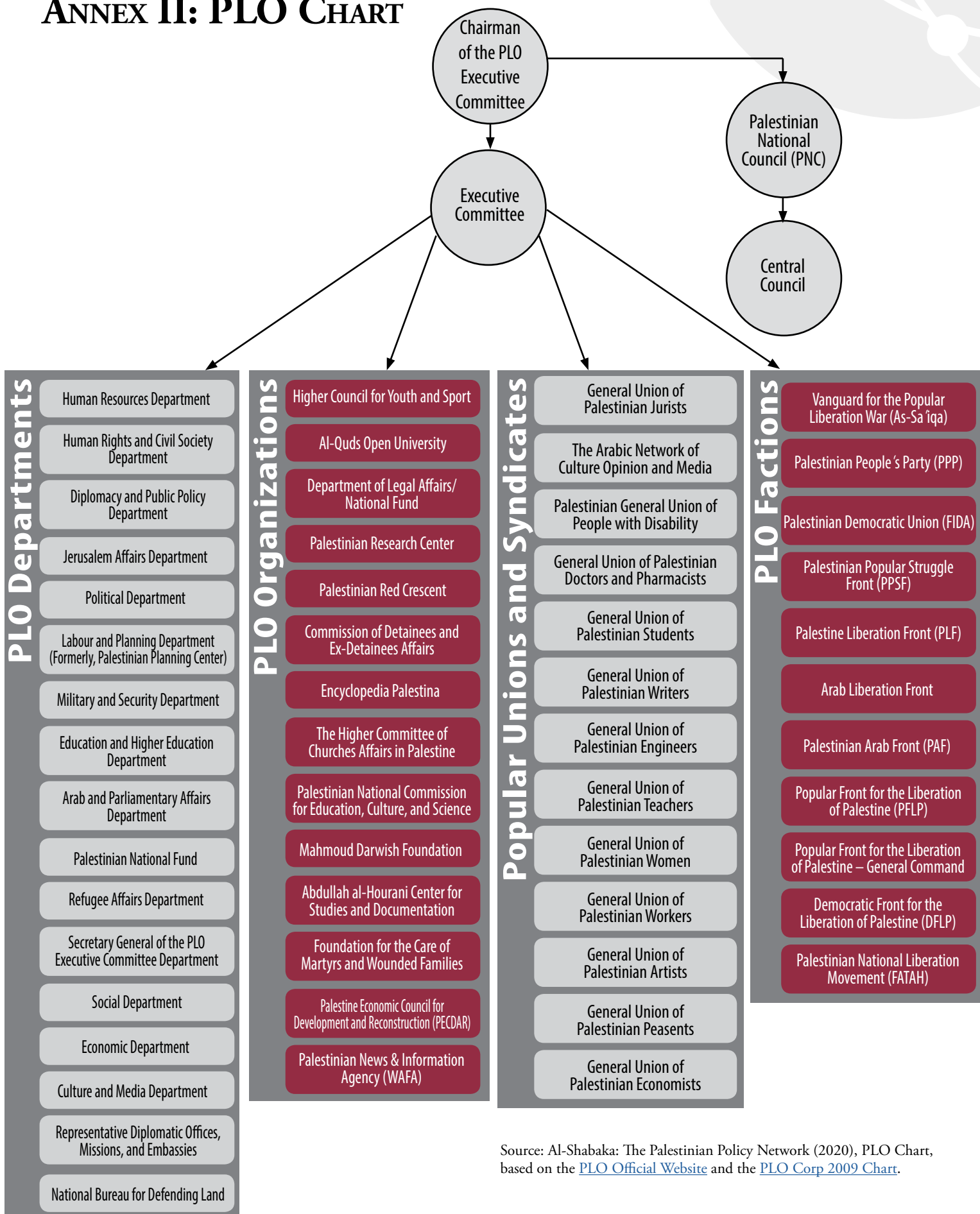
2. The Palestinian Central Council (PCC)

The PCC [was established](#) by the PNC in 1977 and serves as an intermediary between the PNC and the Executive Committee. The decision-making body [is said](#) to have 143 members, including 15 representatives from the Palestinian Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and all 18 members of the PLO Executive Committee, as well as representatives from most Palestinian factions.

3. The Executive Committee (EC)

The EC is elected by the PNC and is the executive branch of the PLO. It [consists of 18 members](#) (three seats are currently vacant and are said to be held for one member from each of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine). The EC’s main functions are to implement the policies and decisions of the PNC and the Central Council as well as to guide and oversee the work of the PA. Its chairman is currently (and has been since 2004) Mahmoud Abbas, who is also the president of the State of Palestine and of the PA as well as the head of Fatah.

ANNEX II: PLO CHART



Source: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network (2020), PLO Chart, based on the [PLO Official Website](#) and the [PLO Corp 2009 Chart](#).

AUTHOR AND CO-FACILITATOR BIOS

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