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Middle East Brief

The Decline of the PLO and the Rise of the PNA

Prof. Dror Ze'evi

On several occasions in the last few weeks, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for an immediate resumption of direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine. In these negotiations, he claimed, the Palestinian side should be represented by the PLO, rather than by the Palestinian government. In a recent speech at the World Economic Forum meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh on June 8, 2006, Mr. Abbas made the following declaration:

How is it possible, some would claim, to carry out negotiations in the shadow of a Palestinian government that does not recognize Israel? My response is that political negotiations with an Israeli government are a historical choice of the Palestinian people, and [these negotiations] are the area of expertise and the responsibility of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and of its Negotiations Department. The Palestinian government does not oppose this and will not obstruct such talks.¹

This comes against the backdrop of a recent joint declaration by Hamas and Fatah prisoners in Israeli jails, calling for national unity and emphasizing the importance of strengthening the PLO.²

Legally, President Abbas and the prisoners have a point. The PLO is still considered by the international community, including the Arab League, to be the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," the official interlocutor on behalf of the Palestinians, and the senior Palestinian governing institution, overseeing even the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), headed by Abbas himself, and the newly elected Hamas government.

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But things are no longer as clear-cut as the Palestinian president would have them. A series of recent events have radically changed the Palestinian political landscape—and as a result, the PLO has lost a great deal of its power and authority. If present trends continue, this process may have important implications for Palestinian domestic politics as well as for the Palestinian-Israeli political process. This Middle East Brief examines the changes in the formal and informal status of the PLO and assesses their possible impact on the region.

The PLO's Rise to Power

In early 1964, President Abd al-Nasser of Egypt came to the conclusion that unruly Palestinian guerillas fighting against Israel posed a threat to internal security in the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip, and to other Arab states as well. He also understood that these forces could be harnessed to advance his cause of Arab unity under Egyptian hegemony throughout the Arab world. In May of that year, spurred on by Egypt, the Arab League established the Palestine Liberation Organization.³

After five years of Egyptian and Arab League tutelage, the leadership of the PLO's Executive Committee passed to Yasser Arafat, who was to lead the organization for close to thirty years, until his death in 2004. Under his leadership the PLO asserted its independence. Its main goal, which was accomplished with remarkable success, was to bring the plight of the Palestinian refugees to the international arena.

After the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians changed shape, and alongside the refugee question another issue was brought to the forefront: the establishment of an independent state in historical Palestine. In subsequent years, Jordan, which had annexed the West Bank in 1949, and Egypt, which assumed control over Gaza at the same time, no longer saw themselves as political patrons of the Palestinian territories, and the PLO's claim for representation of the Palestinian people in their national struggle was recognized by these countries, by other Arab states, and by the world at large.

In the meantime, the PLO went through a series of crises. In 1970, when its burgeoning military forces in Jordan seemed on the verge of toppling the Hashemite regime, war broke out between those forces and the Jordanian army. After the notorious "Black September," during which Jordanian artillery shelled Palestinian refugee camps and hunted down guerilla forces, the Palestinians admitted defeat; Arafat capitulated and moved his forces and command structure to Lebanon. Despite this blow, the power of the PLO grew even further in Lebanon, where its presence initiated tensions and internal fighting that were exacerbated during the Lebanese civil war. At the same time, the PLO gained United Nations recognition (in November 1974) and was given observer status in the General Assembly.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in an attempt to destroy the PLO.⁴ After a prolonged siege on Beirut the PLO was once again forced to depart. Most of the command structure moved to Tunisia and established itself in the city of Tunis while some armed forces were left behind in various Arab countries. This period also saw the first blow to the integrity of the organization, as some of its constituent groups split off, finding refuge in Damascus and challenging the PLO's authority. Under these difficult circumstances it was once again the leadership of Arafat that kept the organization together and invested it with a new sense of purpose.⁵

The first Palestinian uprising, in 1987, was not initiated by the PLO and took it by surprise. It was soon clear that a local leadership was emerging in the West Bank and Gaza, independent of the old institutions. Yet the organization found ways of reinserting itself into the fray and thereby asserting its leadership role, assisting the guerilla forces in the territories by supplying them with arms and ammunition and aiding in planning. In addition, as a result of internal developments and clandestine talks, mainly with United States representatives, in 1988 Arafat announced the establishment of a Palestinian state and implicitly recognized Israel's right to exist by recognizing the UN Partition Plan of 1947. This act gave rise to further discord inside the PLO, and other factions decided to break off.⁶

Despite initial success, at the end of this uprising in 1992, the PLO was once again in dire straits, both economically and politically. Economically, the years of struggle and the breakdown of the Soviet empire threatened the organization's financial resources.⁷ Politically, a new generation had come to the fore in the territories and saw no reason for allegiance to the old powers on "the outside"; they defied the PLO's sovereignty and strove to be recognized as leaders in their own right. The aims of their struggle were different from those of the PLO old guard. Although the plight of refugees and the "right of return" were items on their agenda, these were no longer the most important issues, and they saw the establishment of an independent Palestinian state as their most important goal. Another organization, Hamas, born and bred inside the "territories," also challenged the authority of the PLO.

Yet, once again adapting to changing circumstances, Arafat succeeded in returning to center stage, this time brandishing the ace up his sleeve: explicit recognition of Israel, associated with the signing of the Oslo Accords, as a result of which he and the entire command structure of the PLO were allowed to return and establish the Palestinian National Authority. Once again, this move caused a split in the organization, with some senior members, such as Faruq Qaddoumi, refusing to undersign the accords and remaining in Tunis.⁸

Although in retrospect Arafat succeeded in keeping the PLO in play, and in reestablishing its credentials whenever it seemed to falter, the events leading up to Oslo and occurring in its aftermath left deep scars in the organization, and in Palestinians' appreciation of it.

Internal Tensions

Until his passing in 2004, Arafat served as both chairman of the PNA, based in the "territories," and head of the

Executive Committee of the PLO, based abroad. As such, he could use both organizations to bolster his own standing, and to maneuver against external and internal pressures. While his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, ended up inheriting both functions, he does not have Arafat's legendary status, and for various reasons he decided to downplay his role as PLO chairman. This role was assumed de facto by Mr. Qaddoumi, head of the PLO's political department (a foreign office of sorts), who in the last year seems to have informally acquired more power within the organization.

This separation between the PLO and the PNA has, in and of itself, created two centers of power that compete with one another on both the national and regional scenes. For instance, while most Palestinian diplomatic missions abroad—that is, embassies and interest sections—are staffed by PLO personnel, Abbas has recently attempted to shift some of these positions and appoint his own supporters, who do not necessarily come from within PLO ranks. One hub of tension that lies dormant at present is therefore between Abbas, the formal head of the PLO, and Qaddoumi, the actual man in charge. For the time being, both have an interest in playing down their differences and promoting the PLO as the negotiator on behalf of the Palestinians, but the tension is bound to resurface if and when the organization again comes to play a major role.

An even greater challenge to the authority of the PLO has been the outcome of the recent round of elections. Fatah's poor showing in the elections and its partial ouster from power has given rise to internal strife and has seriously weakened the iron grip of the old "outsider" generation on Fatah's internal politics. The younger politicians—Muhammad Dahlan, Jibril Rajoub, and Marwan Barghouti (who is currently serving time in an Israeli prison), along with leaders of local fighting forces—have finally come into their own. These leaders do not hold the PLO in high regard, and their connections to it are tenuous at best. They see the PNA, not the PLO, as the main arena for their ambitions and as the pinnacle of the Palestinian political system. If and when their cohort assumes power, the PLO will be marginalized even further.

Moreover—and this is the most crucial factor right now—the new Hamas leadership voted into power is not, and has never been, part of the PLO. Although talks about the possibility of Hamas joining the PLO were held until April of this year (and they are still being held intermittently, albeit at a much lower level), nothing has come of them. In March, the PLO made its critique of Hamas's platform public.⁹ In April, new government officials declared publicly that Hamas would not join the PLO, which it views as undemocratic and unrepresentative, unless the

PLO was completely and radically restructured.¹⁰ This demand for restructuring was repeated in the recent prisoners' declaration mentioned above. But while jailed Hamas leaders seem to prefer the restructuring option, others in Hamas have already devoted some thought to founding a separate umbrella organization to represent members of the Palestinian Diaspora. The growing tension between Hamas and Fatah armed factions inside the territories, which has led to bouts of street fighting and armed clashes in recent weeks, does not contribute to the faltering dialogue.

All of these developments amount to a political paradox in which the ruling Palestinian government is alienated from the organization officially recognized as the representative of the Palestinian people. So far this has not led to a complete breakdown, and both sides have shown some flexibility. Recently, for example, Qaddoumi consented to the demand made by Hamas to have two Palestinian foreign relations operations running side by side—his own and the one operated by the government—with an assurance of mutual briefings regarding missions abroad.¹¹ But pressures and internal contradictions are mounting rapidly.

The end point of this historical trajectory is that tensions between the PNA and the PLO have become structural and are no longer the result of particular political alliances. Even if the current standoff is somehow resolved—if the Hamas government is dismissed by Abbas or voted out of power; or if Hamas succeeds in taking over all internal Palestinian loci of power; or if both sides reach some sort of power-sharing agreement—this structural tension will keep dogging the Palestinian political scene. The balance of power will keep tilting in favor of the elected parliament and the government inside the territories, while the PLO will keep losing power.

It could be said that just as the role of the cluster of Zionist “national institutions,” which led the first stages of the struggle for an independent Jewish state, ended when the State of Israel was established in 1948, the PLO's role should have ended with the establishment of a Palestinian Authority in 1994. There is a Palestinian government, this argument would assert, that was democratically elected and represents the will of the people inside the West Bank and Gaza, and this government should represent the Palestinians in their dealings with the world. But if it dissolves the PLO, the Palestinian leadership will have lost one of its greatest claims to legitimacy, namely the fact that it represents not only the population in the “territories,” but also several million Palestinians living in exile. It will also have lost the ability to play one center of power against the other, creating an ambiguity that allows

it to move on the diplomatic front while retaining more entrenched positions it can always retreat to. Both Fatah and Hamas are aware of the advantages of retaining the PLO, and in plotting out the course of developments in the future they will attempt to either preserve the PLO in its present form, or reshape it to fit their needs. The range of options they face is fairly limited.

Possible Futures

The PLO-PNA power struggle may unfold in various ways. One possibility is that, contrary to expectations and after a period of back and forth, talks between Hamas and the PLO will be resumed and will bear fruit, and a formula will be found to include Hamas in the organization. This is what many Palestinians wish for, and what most Palestinian activists and politicians see as the best possible outcome.¹² But such a scenario is unlikely at the present moment, given the growing rift between Hamas and Fatah and Mr. Abbas's recent policy moves in particular. Since Mr. Abbas now intends to use the PLO as a counterweight to the Hamas-led government, he is likely to oppose such a move.

If Hamas joins the PLO, the outcome is sure to radicalize the organization further, and may require it to adopt a more confrontational stance in negotiations. The organization will thus maintain its status as an umbrella organization for all Palestinian parties and factions: nominal unity will be restored, and there will be one official voice speaking on behalf of the people. Yet such a radical platform will force the organization to move away from understandings and agreements reached thus far, and the political process vis-à-vis Israel may be set back. The PLO will be severely handicapped in its role as interlocutor with Israel and with much of the international community.

Another option that Hamas may be contemplating is the establishment of a “mirror” PLO: an extraterritorial organization of its own, adhering to broad political-Islamic principles and calling on other Palestinian groups that accept these premises to join.¹³ This option is not very plausible either, mainly because Hamas's ultimate loyalty is to another umbrella organization: the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas leaders will be reluctant to split their loyalties between two regional organizations that profess similar ideologies and preach the same principles. If it does come to pass, however, such an outcome will ultimately lead the two overarching Palestinian organizations—the PLO and its Hamas-based rival—to be perpetually at each other's throats, and will take the enmity between Hamas and Fatah to a higher level, extending to the Palestinian Diaspora and the entire international community. One

result might be a resurgence of internal violence in Palestinian Diaspora communities. Another may be a realignment of international support for the Palestinians. While some countries will adhere to the PLO as the locus of Palestinian sovereignty, others, including Iran and perhaps Syria, will more likely recognize the Hamas-based organization as the Palestinians' "sole representative." Still others will ignore both organizations completely and address the PNA as their diplomatic counterpart.

The most plausible outcome, however, is that the PNA—the Palestinian parliament and government in Ramallah—will gradually become the main political organ of the Palestinian people as the PLO slowly withers away to become a bureaucratic fossil of limited scope. Abbas's scramble to endow the PLO with renewed vigor as the official channel for peace discussions with Israel may enjoy temporary success, and if Israel cooperates the PLO may indeed return to the limelight for a while. But in the longer run, its claim to represent the Palestinian people will be met with growing political resistance.

If that does, in fact, come to pass and the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of the PNA, the coming years will witness a silent struggle for authority between the PNA and the PLO, mainly with regard to Palestinian representation abroad and control over funds. The power shift will of necessity lead to less representation for the Palestinian Diaspora, and therefore to it becoming less of a priority for Palestinian negotiators. Though any Palestinian government will surely bring up the issue of refugees as part of any attempt at a negotiated settlement, the main concern of the PNA will be the establishment of a viable state in the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁴ Even though a Hamas government is now in charge, in the long run such a development will facilitate negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

(Endnotes)

1) Wafa Palestine News Agency "Israel Should Give Up Claim That There Is No Palestinian Counterpart," *Al-Quds* (May 22, 2006). (author's translation).

2) "Text of Palestinian Prisoners' Document - National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners - by Marwan Barghouti, Abdul Khaleq al Natsheh and Coalition of Prisoners," *One Voice* (May 26, 2006).

3) For a history of the PLO, see Sayigh, Yezid, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993*, (Oxford University Press, 1999); and Sela, Avraham and Moshe Ma'oz, eds., *The PLO and Israel: From Armed Conflict to Political Solution, 1964–1994*, (St. Martin's Press, 1997). On Nasser and the PLO, see also Aburish, Said K., *Nasser: The Last Arab*, (Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), pp. 223–25.

4) This was only part of Israel's strategy. Another goal was to help the mainly Christian Lebanese forces assert their control over the state.

5) Khalidi, Rashid, *Under Siege: PLO Decision-making during the 1982 War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 126–28.

6) "Declaration of Independence," *Palestinian National Authority* (Sept. 9, 2001).

7) Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, pp. 549–50.

8) He later moved to Damascus, where he is based now.

9) "PLO criticises Hamas' programme: The Palestine Liberation Organisation has urged Hamas to reconsider its agenda for government, after its sweeping election victory in January," *BBC News* (March 22, 2006); and Myre, Greg, "P.L.O. Rejects Proposed Platform of Hamas, Now Set to Take Power," *New York Times* (March 23, 2006).

10) "Hamas to ask for parliament confidence despite PLO dispute," *Al Bawaba* (March 22, 2006).

11) al Hussaini, Jihane, "Hamas FM Mahmoud al Zahar Talks to Asharq Al-Awsat," *Asharq Alawsat* (April 20, 2006).

12) See the Palestinian prisoners' document referenced in footnote 2.

13) See a MEMRI translation of the highlights of Mahmud Al-Zahhar's extensive October 2005 interview on www.elaph.com, and of his November 10, 2005 interview to Al-Sharq Al-Awsat: "Hamas Leader in Gaza Dr. Mahmoud Al-Zahar: We'll Join the Legislative Council – and Keep Our Guns" *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series* No. 1028 (Nov. 18, 2005). In this interview, conducted several months before the elections, Al-Zahhar, the current Hamas foreign minister, refers to plans for reconstructing the PLO. In fact he is talking about the establishment of a new organization with the same functions:

Question: “You are agreeing to join the PLO. However, the PLO recognizes Israel, and is bound to it in agreements known as the Oslo Accords, which you have opposed. What will your position on this matter be if you join the PLO? Are you planning a coup in the PLO?”

Al-Zahar: “True, we want to join the PLO - but on the basis of a new program, not of the Oslo program and the agreements. [We want] a program that will enable true representation for Hamas in the PLO, not marginal representation... As for the coup, there will be a revolution in thought and in method - because right now the PLO is a dead body, and you don’t carry out a coup/revolution against the dead. But we will revive this organization by means of new programs and methods.”

See also Wild Abah, Sayyed, “The Palestinian Crisis: The Need for an Alternative to the PLO,” *Asharq Alawsat* (May 2, 2006); and “Zahhar refuses to take part in same international meeting as PLO’s Al-Qaddoumi” *Ma’an News Agency* (May 30, 2006).

14) Mr. Qaddoumi, who is obviously worried about exactly such a development, declared in a recent interview with Asharq Alawsat: “Europe and the United States wanted the PA to be the sole legitimate representative (of the Palestinian people) instead of the PLO, which carries the name of Palestine at the United Nations. The purpose was considering only the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and not abroad. This means denial of the existence of Palestinian refugees, but these attempts failed in the elections.” al Ghawi, Razuq, “Interview with the PLO’s Faruq Qaddumi,” *Asharq Alawsat* (May 30, 2006).

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