

THE PLO

CRITICAL APPRAISALS FROM THE INSIDE

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION



Introduction

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Neither the West Bank nor the Gaza Strip were under occupation when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded, so the purpose of the fledgling resistance organisation was to liberate Palestinian territories west of the West Bank (of the Jordan River) upon which Israel was established in 1948.

Both the (Pan-Arab) National Charter and the Palestinian National Charter were vividly clear in asserting the Palestinian people's undisputed right to their full territories annexed by Israel, and in highlighting armed struggle as the sole means to liberation, while branding the Jewish state as a racist entity that must be eliminated.

By 1974, the PLO had successfully evolved into the legitimate and sole representative of the Palestinian people, and managed to gain international recognition for the Palestinian issue. Forty-two years later, we find ourselves faced with a rich history, filled with lessons and examples of both unwavering heroism and bitter frustration. We are humbled by the long march that the PLO has been on, beginning with its demand for full liberation, and the famous Three Nos, moving on to its Ten Point Program, followed by its Declaration of the State of Palestine, and its recognition of United Nations Resolution 242. The Oslo Accords, and the convening of the twenty-first session of the Palestinian National Council in 1996, then excised some of the most fundamental and critical articles from the National Charter, thereby plotting a new course and a fresh identity for the PLO.

The conference on which this book is based took place at a time of heightened interest in the issue of the restructuring of the PLO. The Palestinian people were at a crossroads. They had to decide whether to forge ahead and close ranks, reaching for an inclusive national programme, embracing the principle of a peaceful rotation of power, abandoning blood-letting and conceding the sanctity of Palestinian blood, promoting transparency, and mobilising all resources to confront the Zionist project. Failing this, the Palestinian situation was poised to deteriorate further, playing into the Israeli plan to create a new reality in Palestine.

Several years have elapsed since the conference was held, and the publication of the English translation of the discussions in 2013 seems to warrant an update on developments that have taken place in the intervening years.

The PLO, 2006–2011

Although the PLO established and gave legitimacy to the Palestinian National Authority in 1994, the Palestinian Authority has since greatly expanded, and the PLO has shrunk and retreated to the point where an outsider might mistake it for a mere branch or subsection of the Authority. Having bled the PLO and its institutions dry, the PLO's leaders (who also head up the Palestinian Authority) have actively negated and marginalised the role of the PLO, confining it to the 'sick room', and limiting it to providing a stamp or seal of approval, and only when necessary to legitimise some action or resolution of the Authority.

The PLO's National Council held just twenty sessions between its founding in 1964 and 1991. In fact, in the two decades between 1991 and 2011, the National Council held just one session! This contravenes the organisation's own bylaws, which call for the Council to meet once every year. In other words, the National Council has, since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, given up its legislative and supervisory role, and has been isolated and marginalised vis-à-vis Palestinian decision making.

Furthermore, the National Council meeting that was held in April 1996 took place after the United States and Israel forced the PLO to annul those articles of the Palestinian National Charter that were antithetical to Israel and to the aims of Zionism. At the 1996 meeting, without the knowledge or consent of PNC president, Salim Zanoun, and without being referred to the relevant committees, Yasser Arafat accredited more than 450 new voting participants, bringing the number of members eligible to participate in amending the Charter to over 850.¹

It is clear that efforts made towards reactivating the PLO and rebuilding its institutions are linked to the comprehensive reform and reordering that is taking place in Palestinian politics. It is equally apparent that this process cannot be successful without negotiations between Fatah, Hamas and the other factions. Palestinians must reach a political consensus and forge a common national programme. Despite the centrality of this issue to the March 2005 Cairo Declaration, negotiations over PLO reform have since been hindered by the fears of some Palestinians, certain Arab

states, and various international powers about the potential dominance of Hamas. These fears intensified after that party won the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Palestinians are internally divided by different and conflicting visions of how to deal with the priorities and principles of national action, how to manage their conflict with the occupation in relation to resistance and compromise, and how to respond to Arab and international pressures. It is, therefore, unfair to oversimplify the differences between Fatah and Hamas, and between the governments in Ramallah and Gaza, as merely a struggle for power and authority. The steadfastness of Hamas in the face of Israeli aggression (including the blockade of the Gaza Strip, the closure of its institutions, the imprisonment of its representatives on the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the hunt for its supporters in the West Bank) cannot be interpreted merely as a desire to secure a better position in the Palestinian Authority. Similarly, it is incorrect to interpret Fatah's insistence that Hamas recognise agreements signed by the PLO, and forms a government that commits itself to the PLO's political programme, and to the Quartet's conditions,² other than as pushing for a political programme that includes recognition of Israel, compromises over most of the land occupied in 1948, and the cessation of all resistance.

Essentially, intra-Palestinian negotiations have suffered from three fundamental crises:

- The first is about the course that the Palestinian national struggle should take, including its basic principles and priorities, its methods, and its political programme. Some propose an ideological Islamic path for resistance, as well as for managing the conflict and seeking change. Others advocate a patriotic and pragmatic path, taking Arab and other immediate realities into account.
- The second crisis is one of confidence, and has deepened as a result of political divisions and insecurity related to Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority's attempts to eliminate Hamas in collaboration with the occupation, and because of ongoing media and armed confrontations between the two parties.
- The third crisis relates to external pressures and conditions – the Quartet's conditions as well as those imposed by the United States and Israel hang like the sword of Damocles over intra-Palestinian negotiations. That is, American threats to stop the Palestinian talks, cut off aid and resume the blockade of the West Bank if

Hamas were to form part of a Palestinian Authority government that does not meet the conditions set by the Quartet, have made one thing clear. The US will not object to Palestinian reconciliation as long as this has a predefined outcome: namely, a Fatah victory in elections, and reassertion of control over the Gaza Strip, as well as the containment, marginalisation, and delegitimation of Hamas. Any other outcome will see the continuation of the blockade and a deepening of the crisis.

- Thus, there is much to be done to reform the PLO and rebuild its institutions in terms of: (i) building confidence among its members; (ii) formulating a national programme and priorities away from the influence of external pressures; and (iii) coming to an agreement on a peaceful rotation of power.

From the Cairo Agreement to the military takeover, 2005–2007

In early 2005, Palestinians entered a new period that tended toward calm, and a process of putting their house in order. Palestinian factions held intensive talks from 15 to 17 March 2005, which culminated in what has become known as the Cairo Declaration. This agreement stressed the thawabet (that is, the fundamental principles or ‘red lines’ of the Palestinian struggle). Consensus was reached on holding Palestinian legislative elections, continuing the process of reforming the Palestinian Authority, and reorganising the PLO on mutually agreed bases, as well as to include all Palestinian factions within its ranks.

During 2005, consensus was almost reached that the reformation of the Palestinian National Council would comprise 300 members, half of whom would represent the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and half of whom would represent Palestinians in the diaspora. However, Hamas’s victory in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Authority’s Legislative Council came as a shock to Fatah, which has long dominated the PLO, and the PLO’s National Council.

At the opening session of the Palestinian Legislative Council on 16 February 2006, the president of the National Council, Salim Zanoun, stated that the 132 members of the Legislative Council would be added to the 783-member National Council. Essentially, this would have meant drowning elected representatives in a sea of appointees. To say the least, this move disrupted all the progress that had been made in 2005 towards meaningfully reviving the PLO.

After the 2006 election results were released, the PLO president, Mahmoud Abbas, was quick to assert the overriding power of the PLO, stressing that the PLO was the decision-making authority for all negotiations, including any that the Palestinian Authority might be involved in, and regardless of which party led the Authority. Abbas thus sought to insulate the 'peace process' from any contrary ideas that a Hamas government might bring to the process, while simultaneously trying to impose the PLO's political programme on the newly elected Hamas leaders. Perhaps unintentionally, Abbas also stressed the importance of expanded Palestinian efforts to rebuild and revitalise the PLO and its apparatuses.³ In addition, Abbas transferred responsibility for oversight of Palestinian embassies abroad from the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Foreign Affairs back to the PLO, after having transferred this responsibility to his office only a few months earlier.

At the end of March 2006, the heads of the Palestinian factions held a meeting in Damascus, which was also attended by Faruq Qaddumi, head of Fatah's political department and secretary-general of its Central Committee. At the meeting, participants decided to form a committee that would be tasked with rebuilding the PLO.⁴ Reports were later published confirming that the committee had indeed reached a draft agreement on how to proceed with rebuilding. Over the next few months, other meetings on the same issue were held in Damascus with Qaddumi's participation.⁵ However, as Abbas's grip over the PLO and Fatah grew tighter, differences between him and Qaddumi deepened. Qaddumi's political and moral influence then began to wane dramatically. On 9 November 2006, Abbas appointed his close aide, Yasser Abed Rabbo, as secretary of the PLO's executive committee. And on 18 December 2006, Abbas shut down the PLO's political office in Amman. This move was considered a direct blow to Qaddumi as it limited his work to the supervision of his department in Tunis.⁶ Thus divisions within Fatah added to the difficulties involved in rebuilding the PLO as a whole.⁷

In the midst of these internal conflicts, and the state of disruption and blockades imposed on the Palestinian areas following Hamas's electoral victory, the National Reconciliation Document, (also known as the 'Prisoners' Document') emerged.⁸ Endorsed by Palestinian political prisoners from various factions, including Fatah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the document called for:

- National unity;
- A peaceful rotation of power;

- Co-operation and complementarity between the institutions of the presidency, the government, the Legislative Council and the judiciary;
- The formation of a government of national unity; and
- Progress with regard to reforming the Palestinian Authority and the PLO.

In Article 3 of the document, the prisoners called for the continuation of the negotiations process alongside resistance efforts. In Article 7, they state that administering the negotiations should be the prerogative of the president of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, 'on the basis of adherence and accomplishment of Palestinian national goals, on the condition that any final agreement be submitted to the new Palestinian National Council for ratification or to seek popular approval of such an agreement by general referendum wherever possible'.⁹

The document was welcomed by Abbas and the PLO's executive committee because aspects of it can be interpreted as accepting the negotiations process led by the president of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. The document also focuses on the establishment of a Palestinian state on territory occupied in 1967, without stating whether such statehood would be considered a final goal, and without affirming or denying Palestinians' right to liberate the territory occupied in 1948. Furthermore, the Prisoner's Document refers the adoption of the results of negotiations with Israel to the Palestinian National Council or to a referendum, despite Hamas's position that fundamental principles cannot legitimately be subject to any kind of vote.

After lengthy discussions between the Palestinian factions, the Prisoner's Document appeared in amended form on 28 June 2006. The amended version retained much of the original document intact, and several articles use language that is vague enough to allow for Fatah, Hamas and other factions to fall back on different interpretations. The articles on the negotiations process remained largely unaltered, apart from an amendment to Article 4, to the effect that the totality of the Palestinian political movement must preserve the rights of the Palestinian people and the fundamental principles of the Palestinian issue.

Despite what seemed to be a concession by Hamas to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority's authority over the negotiations process, talks of the formation of a government of national unity faced continuous obstacles. Insecurity prevailed, along with the tightening of the Israeli

and international blockades, as well as the intensification of the Israeli campaign against Hamas, and resistance forces more generally, with the capture of Gilad Shalit. It was in this context that, on 29 January 2007, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz called for talks to be held between Fatah and Hamas in Makkah.

The Saudi monarch's call was welcomed by both parties, and meetings were held from 6 to 8 February 2007, culminating in the 'Makkah Agreement' between Fatah and Hamas. This agreement stressed the impermissibility of shedding Palestinian blood, consensus on forming a government of national unity, taking steps towards reforming the PLO, as well as affirming both parties' commitment to the principles of political partnership and political pluralism.¹⁰

Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh then submitted his Cabinet to President Abbas on 15 March 2007. Abbas gave his approval, and the Legislative Council approved the Cabinet on 17 March 2007. Haniyeh then gave a speech before the Legislative Council that was considered to be the new government's programme of action, in which he stated that administration of negotiations remained the prerogative of the PLO.

The formation of the national unity government created an environment of optimism and hope that the blockade imposed upon the Palestinian people would be lifted, and that the state of insecurity and lawlessness would be ended. It was hoped that the new political leaders would express the logic and essence of the Makkah Agreement, based on the political partnership between Fatah and Hamas (as well as the other factions). It was clear that three structures would be directly affected, namely: the government, its ministries and its associated bodies; the security forces; and the PLO.

It soon became evident, however, that a different understanding of the political partnership had arisen within the Palestinian presidency, and among influential elements in Fatah. This understanding held that the partnership between Fatah and Hamas was limited to the Palestinian Authority and its ministries, and did not extend to the security forces or the PLO, and that these latter two remained under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian presidency. This disagreement over the meaning and content of the partnership drove a wedge between the parties and quickly began to weaken the new government. Subsequently, no meaningful effort was put into reactivating the PLO or its institutions.¹¹

In addition, while consultations were taking place between Abbas and Haniyeh on the formation of a government of national unity,

Abbas issued a decree on 2 March 2007 appointing Muhammad Dahlan as 'adviser on national security to the President of the Palestinian Authority'. (This was in addition to Dahlan's appointment as secretary of the National Security Council.) In Article 3 of the decree, Dahlan was given the right to participate in the meetings of the PLO executive committee to present and discuss issues within his mandate.¹² Not only was this an affront to Hamas, but it violated the PLO's own regulatory framework, as the meetings of the executive committee have traditionally been limited to members elected by the Palestinian National Council. Not surprisingly, Dahlan's appointment raised concerns among Hamas leaders and others about Abbas's seriousness with regard to reform and political partnership.

The Makkah Agreement lasted less than four months. Although Haniyeh's forming a government of national unity won the confidence of the Palestinian Legislative Council, insecurity and lawlessness grew even more intense during this period. The United States, Israel, and an identifiable grouping within Fatah (in which Dahlan was a major figure) made various attempts to wreck the agreement. Open conflict between Fatah and Hamas then resulted in Hamas taking over the Gaza Strip on 14 June 2007, and the subsequent formation of separate governments in Ramallah and Gaza. In this process, physical distance, bloodshed and further mistrust were added to the existing political confusion and conflict over the distribution of powers. The likelihood of Fatah and Hamas reaching mutual understanding via civil and institutional communication declined.

From the military takeover to the Israeli war on Gaza, 2007–2008

Abbas and his supporters accused Hamas of having carried out a 'bloody coup', and asserted that there was no way of re-establishing relations between the two groupings unless Hamas reversed the effects of its takeover, and affirmed its commitment to Palestinian, Arab and international agreements and laws. In a speech delivered to the PLO's Central Council on 18 July 2007, Abbas declared the 2005 Cairo Declaration to be at an end.¹³

Hamas, meanwhile, saw its actions as legitimate, and argued that it had been forced to take them, given that they had been ordered by the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority (who was also the interior minister at the time), and supported by the majority of the Legislative

Council. They cited the insecurity and lawlessness systematically fostered by the Authority's security forces, noting that these forces had refused to obey instructions issued by their own elected government.

From Hamas's perspective, the caretaker government led by Haniyeh was legitimate in terms of the Palestinian Basic Law, and the formation of another government in Ramallah was the real coup. Hamas had not objected to dialogue so long as this was not prefaced by unreasonable preconditions. Hamas refused to recognise Fatah's overruling of the Legislative Council and the legitimacy of the government of national unity, in favour of the presidency. Hamas also refused to recognise the right of PLO institutions to exercise powers beyond their mandates in order to bypass the legislative institutions of the Palestinian Authority. Hamas called for the security issue to be urgently addressed, along with the rebuilding of the security services on a national and professional basis, and in a way that ensured that these forces were purged of any corrupt or partisan elements.¹⁴

The Palestinian presidency held tight to its decision, ejecting Hamas from its orbit. To achieve this, the presidency required a legitimate reference point for its decisions, and resorted to the PLO and its institutions, while ignoring the Legislative Council. The PLO suddenly became visible on a daily basis once again, despite its almost complete disappearance in the preceding years. PLO institutions began to meet, discuss and decide upon the day-to-day affairs of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, despite the PLO being, as agreed, a reference point rather than an executive or legislative body operating within the framework of the Authority.¹⁵

In line with this orientation, the PLO's executive committee held an emergency meeting on 14 June 2007, the very day on which the situation in the Gaza Strip changed. In this meeting, the committee approved several recommendations and placed them before the president to decide upon. These were:

- Dismissing Haniyeh's government (a decision within the powers of the president);
- Declaring a state of emergency;
- Forming a government to enforce the state of emergency; and
- Conducting early elections.¹⁶

Abbas immediately adopted the recommendations, ordering their implementation through three ordinances. These ordinances have since become the primary means through which Abbas uses the state

of emergency as a pretext to bypass legitimate Palestinian institutions. The task of forming a new emergency government was allocated to Salam Fayyad.

In July 2007, Fatah attempted to change the leadership of the Legislative Council by trying to exploit the fact that Israel had arrested several Hamas leaders. The attempt failed when Fatah still failed to form a majority, so Fatah resorted to the PLO. A meeting of the Palestinian Central Council was convened on 18 July 2007 at which Abbas gave a speech that called on the PLO to ratify his decision to hold early presidential and legislative elections on the basis of proportional representation, and announced the end of the Cairo Declaration signed between all the factions, the document that expressed their consensus regarding the reconstruction of the PLO.

The Central Council agreed to everything Abbas had requested by including the principle of holding elections. At this point, the dangers of holding elections in the West Bank but not in the Gaza Strip became clear – this action would entrench the division between the two areas. Hamas's response was that Abbas did not have the constitutional authority to call early elections. Hamas stressed its 'adherence to the Makkah Agreement and the Cairo Declaration'.¹⁷ In a press conference held in Qatar, Khaled Meshaal, head of Hamas's political bureau, stated that Hamas rejected the bypassing of existing legitimate Palestinian political bodies. He argued that it was unjust to focus on the legitimacy of the presidency while ignoring the legitimacy of the Legislative Council and the government of national unity. Meshaal also stated that Hamas completely rejected the use of PLO institutions as alternative reference points for the Legislative Council, and reasserted that his organisation saw the rebuilding of the security apparatuses on a national and professional basis, and clearing these apparatuses of corruption and suspect elements as the first step towards national reconciliation.¹⁸

In effect, Hamas's stance paralysed the Legislative Council, and stymied the call for early elections. On 2 September 2007, Abbas took the initiative by adopting a new electoral law that established a system of proportional representation in legislative elections. This legislation includes a clause requiring each parliamentary or presidential candidate to have a prior commitment to the political stance of the PLO, thus depriving anyone opposed to the PLO of the right to stand for election. Since Hamas is not a member of the PLO, and opposes many of its decisions and policies, this move further divided the two groups.¹⁹

The role of the smaller factions

The outcome of the January 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council redrew the Palestinian political map, creating a system that can best be described as bipolar. Between them, Fatah and Hamas harvested about 86 per cent of the vote and 90 per cent of the parliamentary seats. The left-wing factions within the PLO – the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian People's Party (PPP) and the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA) – won less than 7 per cent of the vote, and 3.8 per cent of the seats. Meanwhile, the Islamic Jihad movement boycotted the election, but according to opinion polls, would probably have received between 3 and 5 per cent of the voters' support.

On the whole, the behaviour of the smaller factions tended to work against the marginalisation of their role. They argued that their role on a national and historic level, and in the resistance movement, should be taken into account. They also lobbied for a political system based on national consensus rather than on a quota between Fatah and Hamas. In this context, the factions sought to increase their political weight and impact upon Palestinian decision making, while maintaining those aspects of their identities which set them apart and prevented them from being absorbed under the wing of either Fatah or Hamas.

Therefore, the demand for elections to be based on proportional representation was proposed jointly by the PFLP, DFLP, PPP and FIDA, as this would enable these parties to play the role of kingmaker between Hamas and Fatah, neither of which would be likely to win more than half of the votes in a new election. The system of proportional representation enables smaller factions to increase their impact in the democratic game.

Although the national and political programmes of these key PLO factions (particularly the PFLP and the DFLP) are closer to those of Hamas than of Fatah, Hamas has been entirely apathetic about winning these factions over. Both Fronts oppose the Oslo Accords, have embraced the resistance paradigm, and have called for PLO reform, yet Hamas has failed to persuade them to accelerate the process of PLO reform.

While the left-wing factions strongly criticised Hamas's 'coup' and associated actions in the Gaza Strip, they have done little to oppose decrees, actions and security campaigns carried out by Abbas and his presidency, or actions carried out by Salam Fayyad's government against

Hamas in the West Bank. Indeed, the behaviour of these factions in the PLO's executive committee and Central Council has contradicted their stated political positions so often that critics describe them as effectively offering 'political cover' for Abbas and his policies.

On one level, it is possible to attribute the behaviour of the leftist factions to the notion that these factions are ideologically closer to Fatah – in the sense that they share a secular perspective that is incompatible with the Islamist tendencies of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, Hamas has done little to establish common ground with these factions, or to reassure them that Hamas's leadership of the national project would respect and accommodate the roles and views of others, and not negate or exclude them. Moreover, Hamas has yet to agree to the PLO programme, which both the left factions and Fatah have agreed to. Abbas has also agreed with the factions' call for proportional representation in the Palestinian Legislative Council and in the Palestinian National Council, a position for which Hamas has shown no open support.

In addition, some believe that Fatah's control over the PLO's financial resources, upon which these factions' budgets and cadres' salaries are dependent, affects decision-making processes within the factions to some extent. Commentators also point to what they see as a state of crisis and division within some of these factions, between the positions of their leaders inside Palestine (who are close to Abbas), and the more oppositional positions of their leaders abroad.

The Palestinian factions, particularly those under the umbrella of the PLO, have tried to provide a vision for ending Palestinian division. On 21 July 2008, Saleh Zaidan, a member of the DFLP politburo, stated that high-ranking factional leaders had prepared a working document in the hope of initiating a national dialogue that would end the split between Fatah and Hamas.²⁰ About a month and a half later, leading PLO figures stated that PLO factions were working towards the formation of a 'caretaker government' as a way out of the impasse created by the existence of the two separate governments in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They went on to declare that the PFLP, DFLP, PPP, FIDA and the Popular Struggle Front all supported this initiative. The same leaders also shared their view that Fatah was 'paralysed' by Europe and America's backing of Salam Fayyad as prime minister. They suggested that aid payments were being linked to Fayyad retaining both his position and his independence from Fatah, and thus not being subject to its decisions.²¹

The dialogue between Fatah and Hamas

After Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, Abbas, the Ramallah government and Fatah demanded that two sets of conditions be met before dialogue with Hamas could begin: (i) Hamas would have to retreat from the coup in the Gaza Strip, and apologise to the Palestinian people; and (ii) Hamas would have to recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians, abide by the agreements signed by the PLO, and accept the Arab and international conditions that the PLO had accepted.

Furthermore, the Ramallah leaders were willing to speak to Hamas to try and prevent the isolation of the PLO leadership and government, end the blockade imposed on the Palestinian people, and enable early presidential and parliamentary elections to take place.

Fatah, however, refused to enter into a bilateral dialogue with Hamas, preferring to give itself broader legitimacy and greater impetus by having either an interlocutor in the form of a PLO delegation, or sessions that included all factions.

For its part, Hamas argued that the essence of the problem lay between it and Fatah, and proposed that the first step should take the form of a bilateral dialogue between the two parties in order to resolve key issues before broadening out the dialogue to others. Hamas also insisted that the dialogue should take place with no preconditions, that all issues should be open for discussion, and that all political prisoners should be released. In addition, Hamas refused to recognise the PLO as the Palestinians' sole legitimate representative until it could be reformed and reactivated, such that Hamas would be accepted into the PLO as a member. Nor was Hamas willing to commit itself to agreements signed by the PLO, especially those that contravened the fundamental principles of Palestinian resistance. In particular, Hamas rejected the PLO's agreement to recognise Israel, its right to land occupied in 1948, and other temporally undefined agreements.

With both sides set in their positions, no real dialogue took place. Discussion about the possibility of dialogue between Fatah and Hamas, and the need to put the Palestinian house in order, took up most of 2008. An atmosphere of mutual accusations and mistrust prevailed throughout the year and prevented any negotiations. On 9 August 2007, Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, had proposed a six-point plan to help resolve the rift. Hamas welcomed the move, but Abbas's party remained silent. On 9 February 2008 Abbas visited Yemen and

met with Saleh. The Yemeni proposal was then amended to include the most important of Ramallah's conditions for the intra-Palestinian talks. A new Yemeni proposal was drawn up, which called for a return of the situation in the Gaza Strip to what it was before 13 June 2007, adherence to commitments already made by the PLO, and the holding of early presidential and legislative council elections.

Hamas agreed to attend talks in Yemen from 19 to 23 March 2008. Abbas opted to attend under the umbrella of the PLO, and the PLO delegation included Saleh Rafat, secretary-general of FIDA, and Qais Abu Laila, a leader of the DFLP. Seeing the core of the problem as being between Hamas and Fatah, Hamas took the presence of these other leaders as an indication of Abbas's lack of seriousness with regard to the talks. In the four days of talks, the essence of the dispute centred on the first article of the proposal. Eventually, it was agreed that the phrase 'adherence to the commitments made by the PLO' could be deleted from the text of the proposal. The debate then moved on to the substance of the proposal itself, with Hamas arguing that it was a framework for dialogue and not for implementation.

The talks ended with agreement on what was termed the 'Sana'a Declaration' on 23 March 2008, which is separate from the Yemeni initiative. The declaration was signed by Azzam al-Ahmad of Fatah and Musa Abu Marzuq of Hamas. In the declaration, Fatah and Hamas agreed that the Yemeni initiative was a framework for the resumption of dialogue between the two parties, to return the Palestinian situation to what it was before the 2007 events in the Gaza Strip, and a confirmation of the unity of the Palestinian homeland, people and authority.

As soon as it was issued, the Sana'a Declaration was subject to severe attack by Abbas's advisers, as was Azzam al-Ahmad for signing it. A war of words erupted between al-Ahmad, Nimer Hammad and Yasser Abed Rabbo. Abbas himself sided with his advisers, refusing to accept the Yemeni initiative as a framework for dialogue and insisting that it should operate as a framework for implementation.²² It appears that after a few days, al-Ahmad retreated back to the position taken by Abbas. The obstruction of the Yemeni initiative and the Sana'a Declaration showed that the atmosphere was not yet ripe for Palestinian reconciliation, and that the preconditions set for the talks had sucked away their momentum.

Abbas then launched a new call for dialogue, in which (because of its influence in the Palestinian and Arab political arena, as well as its alignment with the political line that Abbas represented) Egypt played

an active role. On the evening of 5 June 2008, Abbas met with the PLO executive, which included representatives of several factions, and renewed his call for dialogue, using strongly conciliatory language. A committee was formed to follow up on the issue of reconciliation, and included: Hikmat Zeid, Nimer Hammad, Ahmed Abdel Rahman from Fatah; Abdul Rahim Mallouh of the PFLP; Mahmoud Ismail of the Arab Liberation Front; and Mustafa Barghouti as an independent. President Abbas then immediately requested that President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt sponsor and host a Palestinian dialogue, and Hamas welcomed the initiative.

By the end of September 2008, there were reports that Cairo had prepared a paper outlining five key issues for the Palestinian talks, and that there was almost consensus from the parties on four of these, namely: refraining from violence; the formation of a government of national consensus; the rehabilitation of the security apparatuses; the rehabilitation of the PLO, dates for presidential and legislative elections.²³

Tensions ran high again in late October 2008, when Hamas began to suspect that the talks might not lead to genuine reconciliation, but would favour Fatah. Hamas feared that no meaningful responses would be forthcoming in relation its demands that there be equality between the parties, and that Abbas attend all the meetings as head of Fatah and a key party to the dispute, rather than as a sponsor or convener of the talks.

On 8 November 2008, Hamas and three of the other factions, (the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP-General Command, and Sa'iqa), informed the Egyptian hosts that they were no longer willing to attend the Cairo meeting.²⁴ The PLO's executive committee issued a statement placing 'full responsibility' for the failure of the Cairo meeting squarely on Hamas's shoulders.²⁵

The PLO's Central Council, despite the reservations surrounding its authority, then gave Abbas the support he wanted by electing him president of the State of Palestine on 23 November 2008. This was before the end of his term as president of the Palestinian Authority.

Meanwhile, Faruq Qaddumi was one of several PLO and Fatah leaders who vehemently and openly criticised Abbas and his supporters. On 25 February 2008, Qaddumi (head of the PLO political department) criticised Abbas for forcing a number of political department staff into retirement. In his criticism, Qaddumi referred to the illegality and illegitimacy of the PLO's executive committee,²⁶ stressing that the

committee had lost its quorum.²⁷ At the same time, Qaddumi called for Hamas and other Palestinian factions to join the PLO with no preconditions, for the convening of a new National Council, the election of a new executive committee, and the development of mechanisms to ensure PLO reform.²⁸ Qaddumi put forward a programme in which he called for the separation of the PLO and Palestinian Authority, the separation of their respective presidencies, maintaining a commitment to the right of resistance, the right of return and respect for Palestinian pluralism.²⁹

At the same time, various leading Palestinian figures continued to call for the reactivation of the PLO, the rebuilding of its institutions, including its National Council, and to emphasise the right of return for all Palestinians. A group of these figures, most prominent among them being Shafiq al-Hout, Salman Abu Sitta and Bilal al-Hasan, met in Beirut in May 2007, and continued their activity in 2008.

From the Israeli war on Gaza to the reconciliation agreement, 2009–2011

During the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip (from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009), the performance of the PLO left much to be desired. Frustration resulting from this, as well as the failure of talks on reforming the PLO, led Khaled Mesh'al to declare on 28 January 2009 that Hamas was working 'with all the factions to create a Palestinian representation and leadership body that will uphold the right of return and the fundamental principles of the Palestinian struggle.'³⁰

Mesh'al's comments sparked a storm of controversy. Fatah and its allies launched an attack on Hamas, capitalising on Palestinians' desire for national unity and the still widespread sentiment that the PLO represented the spiritual home of the Palestinian people. Mesh'al's comments were turned against him and used to undermine Hamas, the popularity of which had reached new heights given its steadfastness in the face of Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority and its leadership in Ramallah were harshly criticised. Fatah and Palestinian Authority officials made statements to the effect that: they would prevent Hamas from 'trying to bury the PLO';³¹ 'Mesh'al's attempts are bound to fail'; Fatah would stop the 'Iranian conspiracy';³² Hamas had refused from the outset to engage in 'Palestinian national action';³³ and that Mesh'al's statements symbolised 'a plot and a coup against the PLO' that were to be 'rejected and denounced'.³⁴

Rather than attempting to address the poor state of affairs in which the PLO found itself, the debate thus took a hostile and provocative turn. Few in Fatah or the PLO stopped to consider who would benefit most from the crippling of the PLO's legislative and executive arms, from the organisation's conversion into a mere tool of a specific faction, or its relegation to a back room until required to endorse or ratify a particular decision. However, Fatah leader, Hussam Khader, put things plainly when he called for diligent discussion, noting that the leadership of the PLO, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority should be 'prepared not only for partnership with Hamas, but also for it to lead the PLO'.³⁵ Mohammad Nazzal, a member of Hamas's politburo, explained that Meshaal did not intend his statement to be interpreted as calling for the abolition of the PLO, or for the building of an alternative institution. What Meshaal had intended was to call for a structure through which Palestinian factions that are excluded from the PLO could co-ordinate their actions.³⁶

In any event, the PLO has since become a key item on the agenda of the intra-Palestinian negotiations, and was the subject of extensive discussions in six rounds of talks that took place in the first half of 2009. In these talks, agreement was reached on matters relating to PLO reform as outlined in an Egyptian proposal, which called for:

- The activation and development of the PLO based on the consent of all factions.
- The formation of a new Palestinian National Council, with broad representation of Palestinians in Palestine and the diaspora.
- The establishment of a committee to develop the PLO, and determine the relationship between the institutions, structures and functions of both the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, while maintaining the PLO as the higher reference body and ensuring that work and mandates are not duplicated.³⁷

The committee would act as a co-ordination mechanism, without political entitlements or obligations. It was to begin its work immediately after the signing of the agreement, and its mandate was to end after the election of a new Palestinian National Council. Until then, the committee was to lay down the foundations and mechanisms for the PLO's functioning, address crucial issues in political and national affairs, and follow up on the decisions taken in the talks. The Egyptian proposal also stated that the committee would be composed of sixteen members from Fatah, Hamas, other factions and independents, and

that Hamas and Fatah could each nominate eight of the committee members after which President Abbas would issue a presidential decree establishing the committee. Abbas was also supposed to act as a reference point for this committee given his position as head of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority.

Egypt submitted a proposed final text of the proposal. Egypt then asked Fatah and Hamas to sign the twenty-two-page document before 15 October 2010. In the context of the Goldstone Report scandal, Fatah was quick to agree, but Hamas asked for more time to review the text. Hamas then asked for a number of amendments to be made within the body of the document, or for an annex to be added to give their amendments some political and legal weight. The most significant of these amendments were: (i) the demand that the interim leadership, which would take charge until the elections for PLO institutions, would be able to work without obstruction; (ii) that the elections commission be formed by President Abbas in partnership with Hamas; (iii) that a higher committee on matters of security be formed by President Abbas in partnership with Hamas to implement the agreement; and (iv) that the security forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip be rebuilt and restructured.

According to the Egyptian proposal, the Palestinian factions had reached consensus on the holding of presidential and Legislative Council elections, as well as Palestinian National Council elections simultaneously on 28 June 2010, and this date was not contested by any of the factions. However, the crisis surrounding the release of the Goldstone Report, as well as Hamas's insistence on the inclusion of its amendments in the paper, led Abbas to issue a presidential decree on 23 October 2009 declaring that presidential and Legislative Council elections would be brought forward to 24 January 2010.³⁸

The Palestinian Central Council declared its support for the decree,³⁹ and Fatah stated that the decree was a constitutional necessity for paving the way out of the crisis. Hamas rejected the decree, barring the elections commission from operating in the Gaza Strip, and threatened to act against anyone who tried to prepare for elections.⁴⁰ On 12 November 2009, the elections commission announced that it would be unable to hold elections in accordance with the schedule set by the presidential decree because of its inability to work in the Gaza Strip.⁴¹ Abbas and Fatah then abandoned the January 2010 elections.

Abbas declared that he would not be running for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, even though the Fatah leadership and the

PLO's executive committee were encouraging him to run for a second term. He noted that he had also received messages from Israel, the USA, Egypt, the king of Jordan and others from the so-called axis of 'moderation' to convince him to reverse his decision.⁴²

The PLO Central Council then attempted to provide for the fact that elections could not be held. They issued a decree on 16 December 2009 extending the mandate of the president, the Palestinian Authority and the Legislative Council until such time as presidential and legislative elections could be held in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁴³ The Central Council's decision not only provided political backing to the president, but also to the Legislative Council, thus attempting to prevent a deepening of the divide between the parties. However, the same action can also be understood as the Council operating beyond the limits of its powers and mandate. Indeed, Hamas argued that the Central Council had no constitutional authority to extend the president's term, and described the Council as an 'illegitimate entity' and 'an offshoot of bodies whose terms have expired'.⁴⁴

Such disruptions of the national reconciliation process continued for much of 2010, but a breakthrough occurred after Mesh'al met with the chief of Egyptian General Intelligence Service, Omar Suleiman, in Makkah. Suleiman stated that he was not opposed to a Fatah–Hamas agreement that took into account Hamas's reservations related to the Egyptian proposal.⁴⁵ A round of talks was held in Damascus on 24 September 2010 at which Hamas's comments were accepted, with the exception of those relating to security. A further meeting of delegations from the two factions met in Damascus on 9 November 2010, but failed to achieve the desired results.

The changes that the Arab world has witnessed since the beginning of 2011 have helped to push the Palestinian reconciliation process forward. Haniyeh's invitation to Abbas to visit the Gaza Strip, and the latter's acceptance, were positive steps. Furthermore, the signing of a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo on 3 May 2011, after the incorporation of Hamas's comments and the untangling of some of the security knots that had held up the agreement, was an important turning point in the path of Palestinian national unity.

Supplementary elections for the Palestinian National Council

In the summer of 2009, Fatah leaders directed their efforts towards filling the vacant seats in the PLO executive committee, which had lost its legal quorum due to the death or withdrawal of a number of members. Hamas and other factions concerned about reform of the PLO saw this as a retrogressive step, and as symbolising a withdrawal from the reconciliation process, since it took place just as the final touches were being placed on the reconciliation agreement. For Hamas and other factions, Fatah's priority should not have been to fill the committee's vacancies or to make any arrangements aimed at entrenching Fatah's dominance, but rather to stop using the PLO as a tool in the face of opposition.⁴⁶ Fatah, however, took the view that there was no reason to wait for the reconciliation agreement to enter its implementation phase when there was need to make arrangements, even temporary ones, so that the PLO could carry out its basic tasks. They restated that, whatever else there was to say about the PLO, it remained the sole legitimate representative of Palestinians on a regional and international level.

Salim Zanoun, as head of the Palestinian National Council, announced that a special emergency session of the Council would be held on 25 August 2009 at the presidential headquarters in Ramallah. The purpose of this meeting was to elect six members to the executive committee to replace six members who had died, namely: Yasser Arafat, Yasser Amr, Suleiman Najjab, Faisal Hussein, Emile Jarjui and Samir Ghosheh.⁴⁷

The meeting took place, with 325 of over 700 members in attendance, most of whom had been appointed to the Council in 1996, and whose terms on the Council should have expired three years later. At the meeting, the following four members were unanimously appointed: Saeb Erekat (Fatah), Ahmad Majdalani (PSF), Hanna Amira (PPP), and Saleh Rafat (FIDA). An election was held for the remaining two seats, and these were won by Ahmad Qurei (Fatah) with 234 votes, and Hanan Ashrawi (independent) with 182 votes. After the meeting, the PLO's executive committee comprised of eighteen members: Mahmoud Abbas, Saeb Erekat, Faruq Qaddumi, Ahmad Qurei, Tayseer Khalid, Abdul Rahim Mallouh, Ali Ishaq, Abu Ismail, Hanna Amira, Saleh Rafat, Yasser Abed Rabbo, As'ad Abdul Rahman, Riad al-Khudari, Ghassan Shaka, Muhammad Zuhdi Nashashibi, Zakaria al-Agha, Hanan Ashrawi and Ahmad Majdalani.⁴⁸

Some Palestinian factions have used their position in the PLO to play a role on the Palestinian stage that is disproportionate to their actual political or popular strength. For example, FIDA holds barely any seats even in the Legislative Council, yet Yasser Abed Rabbo, a former head of that party, holds the position of secretary of the PLO's executive committee, and has been criticised by many for his negative role in the division between Fatah and Hamas. Moreover, Abbas appointed the secretary-general of FIDA, Saleh Rafat, as head of the military department of the PLO.⁴⁹ The fact that these two key positions were given to leaders from a very small party, and that military leadership was given to a faction that has no involvement in armed struggle or the intifada, reinforces the view that Abbas is not serious about the reform of the PLO. The basis for this view is clear if we consider that the coalition between FIDA, the PPP and the DFLP was unable to win more than two seats in the Legislative Council, yet between them they hold four of the eighteen seats on the PLO's executive committee (including Abed Rabbo). Interestingly, the executive committee then formed a sub-committee, headed by Rabbo himself, to formulate a plan for the development of the PLO and its institutions.⁵⁰

At the conclusion of the 2009 National Council meeting, Mahmoud Abbas stated that 'we can now say that Palestinian legitimacy is in good shape, that the legal quorum is in order, that the PLO is well. Disgraced are those who await the ruin of this organisation.'⁵¹ Clearly, this statement is more wishful thinking than reality. Indeed, Fatah leader, Nabil Amr, indicated that Abbas himself had admitted that he had done nothing with the PLO since he had taken over its leadership. Amr mockingly commented that this was almost too obvious to be worth noting.⁵²

The holding of a National Council meeting in Ramallah under occupation raised a storm of criticism around the reality of the Council's independence and freedom, and its ability to represent the Palestinian people at home and abroad. Further criticisms have also been raised regarding problems associated with the expiry of its members' terms as representatives, and the absence of major factions such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Conclusion

After nearly forty years of almost exclusive leadership of the Palestinian struggle, the leadership of the PLO (which also led Fatah and the

Palestinian Authority) were not interested in, let alone willing to accommodate, a rotation of power – especially to parties that differed with them in terms of ideology, strategy and priorities for national action, as is the case with the Islamist movements.

There is no doubt that the struggle between Fatah and Hamas in 2006 and 2007 was one cause of the PLO's failed reform process. This struggle on its own, however, cannot take all the blame. The weakening and marginalisation of the PLO is strongly linked to the Oslo Accords, negotiations with Israel, and Palestinian leaders' penchant for supporting charismatic leaders rather than for developing strong institutions. Had the PLO been strong enough to accommodate the various components of the Palestinian people, to act as an umbrella for all of the factions and their capacities, the problems of insecurity and lawlessness, as well as the 'coup' facing legitimate institutions, would have been more easily managed.

However, despite the fact that the terms of office of the PLO's National Council, Central Council and its executive committee expired in 1999, the latter two bodies have continued to convene. This has conferred a kind of semi-legitimacy on the PLO's leadership, and its support for the government in Ramallah, as well as its opposition to Hamas and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. The Central Council and executive committee have given President Abbas the authority to act regardless of the fact that many see the legal and constitutional validity of both bodies as having expanded beyond their respective mandates, and as having encroached on the powers of the Legislative Council where Hamas controls a large majority of seats.

As for Hamas, it has continued to emphasise the necessity of rebuilding the PLO on a sound basis to ensure broad participation, political pluralism, and free elections as a basis for membership of the Palestinian National Council, whenever and wherever this is possible. Hamas has refused to recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative in its current form, especially since Hamas is not currently represented in it, and given its institutional, ideological and political criticisms of the PLO. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad has a similar position.

Several agreements between Fatah, Hamas and other factions have emphasised the need for reforming the PLO. These include the 2005 Cairo Declaration, the 2006 Prisoners' Document, the 2007 Mecca Agreement and the 2011 Egyptian Paper on national reconciliation. However, much effort, determination and dedication is still required to transform what has been agreed on paper into implementation on the ground.

Endnotes

- 1 *Addustur*, Amman, 3 August 2005.
- 2 Officially known as the Quartet on the Middle East, this body includes the UN, the USA, the EU, and Russia.
- 3 See Saleh (2007).
- 4 *Al-Hayat*, London, 29 March 2006.
- 5 See, for example, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (Palestine), 18 April 2006; and *al-Hayat*, 9 July 2006.
- 6 *Al-Hayat*, 11 November 2006; and *Asharq Al Awsat*, London, 22 December 2006.
- 7 Saleh (2007: 43).
- 8 For the full document, see http://www.mideastweb.org/prisoners_letter.htm. The five prisoners who wrote the document were: Marwan Barghouthi (Fatah Secretary in the West Bank and PLC member); Sheikh Abdul Khaliq al-Natsheh (a prominent Hamas leader); Sheikh Bassam al-Sa'di (from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad); 'Abdul Rahim Mallouh (deputy secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and member of the PLO executive committee); and Mustafa Badarneh (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine).
- 9 See: Saleh and Saad (2008: 364); on the reactions of the various parties to the document, see: *Al-Hayat*, 12 May 2006; *Assafir*, Beirut, 12 May 2006; and the full text in *Assafir* 27 May 2006.
- 10 Saleh and Saad (2009: 122).
- 11 See Saleh (2008: 34–35).
- 12 See Shaker Jawhari, Dahlan, 'The Path to Succeeding Mahmoud Abbas', *Akhbaruna*, 11 April 2007 (Available online at <http://www.akhbaruna.com/node/3760>); see also *Al-Watan*, Abha (Saudi Arabia), 3 March 2007.
- 13 See Saleh (2008: 53).
- 14 See, for example, reports about Khaled Mesh'al's press conference in Doha, reported in *al-Wattan* (Qatar) and *al-Hayat* on 22 July 2007.
- 15 See Saleh (2008: 50).
- 16 See www.arabs48.com, 14 June 2007; *Al-Hayat*, 15 June 2007.
- 17 *Al-Hayat*, 20 July 2007.
- 18 See *al-Wattan* (Qatar), and *Al-Hayat*, 22 July 2007.
- 19 See *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (Ramallah), and *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), 3 September 2007.
- 20 *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 22 July 2008.
- 21 *Al Khaleej*, (Sharjah) 7 September 2008.
- 22 *Al-Hayat*, 24 March 2008.
- 23 *Okaz* (Jeddah), 30 September 2008.
- 24 *Al-Hayat*, 9 September 2008.
- 25 *Annahar* (Beirut), 13 November 2008.
- 26 *Al-Haqa'iq* (London) 15 March 2008. Available online at <http://www.alhaqaqeq.net/?rqid=9&secid=3&art=84643>
- 27 *Al-Sharq* (Doha) 10 August 2008; and *Al-Hayat* 17 October 2008.
- 28 *Al-Hayat*, 17 October 2008.
- 29 Quds Press International News Agency (London), 23 November 2008.
- 30 Mesh'al made this announcement at the 'Gaza has Triumphed' festival held in Doha on 28 January 2009; see *Filastin*, 29 January 2009.
- 31 Statement of Saeb Erekat, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 30 January 2009.

- 32 Statement by Hussein al-Sheikh in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2009.
- 33 Statement by Azzam Al-Ahmad on Al Jazeera.net, 29 January 2009.
- 34 From a statement by the Palestinian National Council, *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 1 February 2009.
- 35 *Al-Hayat*, 4 February 2009.
- 36 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 February 2009.
- 37 For more information about the Egyptian proposal, see Mahmoud Abdou, 'Disunity in Palestine: Its history and implications for the peace process' *Peace and Conflict Monitor*, 18 April 2013 (available online), and 'The Main Terms of the Palestinian Conciliation Agreement', *Al-Hayat*, 29 April 2011.
- 38 WAFA Palestinian News Agency, 23 October 2009.
- 39 Reuters, 25 October 2010.
- 40 *Al-Ahram* (Cairo), 30 October 2010.
- 41 *Al-Hayat*, 13 November 2009.
- 42 On the support of the Executive Committee, see: *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 6 November 2009; on the support of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, see: *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 9 November 2009; on US, Israeli, Egyptian and Jordanian support, see *Al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut) 6 November 2009.
- 43 *Al-Hayat*, 17 December 2009.
- 44 See, for example, the statement by Fawzi Barhoum, *Filastin*, 17 December 2009; and the statement by Musa Abu Marzouk, *al-Sabeel* (Amman), 26 December 2009.
- 45 *Al-Hayat*, 6 October 2010.
- 46 On the position of Hamas, see the statement by Sami Abu Zuhri in *al-Khalij*, 18 August 2009; and the statement of the Palestinian government in Gaza, on the Palestinian Information Center website, 18 August 2009; as well as the statement made by Hamas in Okaz on 22 August 2009.
- 47 *Al-Hayat*, 25 August 2009.
- 48 WAFA Palestinian News Agency, 26 August 2009; see also *Al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 27 August 2009.
- 49 *Al-Sharq*, Doha, 27 August 2008.
- 50 It is interesting to note that the PLO's executive committee formed a committee of its own, chaired by Rabbo, to develop a plan for the reform of the PLO and its institutions; see *Al-Khalij*, 29 August 2009.
- 51 WAFA Palestinian News Agency, 26 August 2009.
- 52 *Al-Ghad* (Amman), 28 August 2009.

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At the turn of the millennium, after decades of struggle, the Palestinian Liberation Organization was in a shambles. In 2005, a reconciliation conference held in Cairo seemed to offer some hope for the revitalisation of the organisation, but Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian Authority elections caught the PLO off-guard. Conflicts and tensions exploded as the PLO tried to claw back the power it had lost. Amid calls for the organisation to renew itself or make way for a new group, the al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations convened a conference in Beirut to discuss the PLO. Representatives of the PLO's main factions joined leaders from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, as well as activists and academics, to discuss what they could learn from the past, and try to forge some consensus on how to take the Palestinian struggle forward.

This volume documents the papers and debates presented at the conference. Originally published in Arabic, the book provides a fascinating window on Palestinians' unique understandings of the history of their struggle, and of the PLO. It offers an insider's view on issues such as national unity, the intricate nature of relations between Palestinians in the diaspora and those in the Occupied Territory, the fragmented nature of the Arab condition, as well as the impact of the meddling by Arab nations and western powers in Palestinian affairs.

For anyone interested in Palestine, and in national liberation struggles more broadly, this powerful collection provides an essential anthology of key perspectives on the Palestinian struggle upto 2006. The book offers readers a rare opportunity to eavesdrop on the conversations of those intimately involved in searching for solutions to one of the world's most intractable conflicts.



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