

# The PLO: Why an Alternative and Why the Panic?

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When Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal declared before a cheering crowd in Doha , Qatar , on January 28, the need for a new leadership, his words generated panic amongst leaders of the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority as well as traditional Palestinian leadership elites stationed in various Arab capitals.

The reaction to Mashaal's call was more furious than most of the statements issued by the PA and its backers during the 23-day Israeli onslaught against the Gaza Strip, which killed and wounded thousands of innocent Gazans.

Mashaal, who spoke triumphantly in Qatar exhorted that the PA "in its current state is no authority." "It expresses a state of impotence, abuse and (it is a) tool to deepen divisions," he stressed. He called for the creation of a new leadership structure that would include all Palestinians.

Mashaal intentionally remained ambiguous regarding the nature of the new structure, perhaps to examine the reactions to his call before moving forward with any tangible plans.

Expectedly, the Old Guard who largely remained mute during the Gaza onslaught, reacted with fury to what they understood as Hamas' attempt to discount the PLO, which, for them, represents a place of personal leverage and status. However, there were some outsiders to the PA's Old Guard apparatus who rejected any alternative to the PLO because of what the organization for long represented, a platform that guided and guarded Palestinian national aspirations for many years.

But why an alternative to the PLO, and why the fury over a call for a new leadership structure?

The two main Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah agreed in Cairo in 2005 to revamp the PLO, which would allow Hamas and other organizations that operate outside its political structures to join. But the agreement was never activated. Each side accused the other of delaying the much needed reform. Then, the disagreement appeared factional and political, as opposed to a substantiated one, predicated on principals.

But the Israel war on Gaza has created a political reality that cannot be discounted as factional. Indeed the reverberation of the post Gaza war can be felt throughout the Middle East , and even beyond, and it will be some time before the full political and non-political impact of the war is fully realized. However, as far as inner-Palestinian politics is concerned, the war on Gaza has yielded two distinctly different groups, one that is being increasingly referred to as the 'resistance factions' (Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other socialist and nationalist groups) and the Oslo factions (mainly Fatah, but with a few other less known

groupings), dubbed as such because it embraced the Oslo 'peace process' culture within Palestinian society. Fatah dominates the PLO, which also includes factions that stand in solidarity with Hamas in Gaza and Damascus .

Following the signing of the Oslo accords in September 2003, the PA, with limited jurisdiction, if any, was established at the expense of the PLO, which was once seen as an organization that represented Palestinians everywhere. The latter's authority, international import and political relevance dissipated over time, to the point that it became an institution that simply represented its members or at best one specific faction, Fatah. The PLO would resurface once in a while to serve as a rubber stamp for PA policies, and had long ceased to represent all Palestinians or play any important role in shaping political realities in occupied Palestine or anywhere else.

The PLO's state of idleness is relatively a new phenomenon. The PLO was established in 1964, at the behest of Egypt 's Jamal Abdul-Nasser. It served a complementary role at the time, but grew more independent from Egypt , although not entirely independent from Arab politics or the hegemony of specific leaders and parties. Nonetheless, the PLO served an important role over the years, for it embodied various Palestinian institutions such as the Palestine National Council (PNC), the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), the Palestine National Fund (PNF), and more.

But Oslo demanded a new political arrangement that expected a non-democratic body to represent Palestinians, for obvious reasons. Thus, the PLO was marginalized, almost entirely. Palestinians in Diaspora, especially those lingering in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere, felt particularly disowned, for the PA didn't represent them and the PLO was no longer a formidable body that mattered in any truly meaningful way. The PLO however existed, in the minds of some as a symbol of a unifying body that expressed a nation's political aspirations. For others, it was a useful tool summoned to endorse the PA's political agenda whenever needed. For example, under pressure from the US and Arafat, PNC members met to nullify clauses of the Palestinian constitution that deny Israel's "right to exist", and again, in 1998, under Israeli pressure, and in the presence of former US President Bill Clinton they were summoned once again to stress Israel's right to exist.

The PNC has not held another meeting since.

The emergence of Hamas as a political power in 2006 was perceived as a great threat to the Old Guard, for inclusion of Hamas carried the risk of canceling all the "achievements" scored by the PA since Oslo . Thus the delay in implementing the Cairo Agreement.

The war on Gaza , which was meant to crush Hamas, emboldened and empowered the movement and its supporters, who now insist that any national unity would have to accommodate post-Gaza realities. In other words, "resistance" would be affirmed as a "strategic choice." More, a PLO that is revamped based on compromises that satisfy both camps could also mean the end of privilege and domination of the Ramallah-branch over Palestinian affairs. Thus the pandemonium triggered by Mashaal's declaration.

Many Palestinians are still hoping that the PLO can be revamped without the need for further fragmentation. However, since neither the current PLO nor the PA are truly independent bodies, one has to wonder if national unity under the current circumstances is at all possible.

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