

## The PLO: A Positive Model or Doomed for Failure?

### PART II Roundtable on Palestinian Diaspora and Representation

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[This is PART II of a [three-part roundtable on Palestinian Diaspora and Representation](#) moderated by Jadaliyya Co-Editor [Noura Erakat](#). It features [Naseer Aruri](#), [Seif Da'na](#), [Karma Nabulsi](#), and [Sherene Seikaly](#). Read the [INTRO](#), [PART I: Palestinians Organizing in Diaspora](#), [Part II: The PLO: A Positive Model or Doomed for Failure?](#).]

- 1. Is it fair to say that prior to Oslo, Palestinians had effectively organized themselves in a transnational governing body in the form of the PLO and the PNC? What are some elements of this historical experience that may be taken for granted in the current discourse on representational politics? What is the value of representational government today, in the form of reviving the PNC for example, and are there different, more forward-looking models, worth considering?**

#### Karma Nabulsi

Rather than look at comparative cases (and there are many that can and will continue to be useful here), the richest experience we need to draw upon first and foremost is our own. We have a quite extraordinary and truly epic tradition of collective organizing in our own revolutionary history, and one that provides us with principled guidelines to both liberation and representation.

In exploring representative and revolutionary mechanisms, one that was directly related to overcoming the Oslo framework's physical, geographic, and political fragmentation took place in the early years of the last decade. Dozens of civic and political organizations in refugee camps and exile engaged in a mobilization from 2002 to 2006 involving tens of thousands of Palestinians in the more than twenty four countries where our people now live and struggle. It also now provides us with an extremely useful template, as its conclusions go directly to the questions we now ask ourselves that we must answer. The results were plain: Palestinians everywhere seek direct representation in our national struggle, and see the only institutional framework within which it can have that representation is through reclaiming the national parliament of all Palestinians, the Palestine National Council of the PLO. This demand has already been synthesized into a collective one, and it has already been articulated by a broad base of our people.

At this moment we also now possess a forceful appreciation that only through reclaiming our national political institutions can we, as Palestinians, fashion our own destiny. And here the Arab spring has played a great role in clearing the minds of a generation of young Palestinians to understand that rather than engaging as solidarity activists with an existential Palestine, the task before us is to organize democratically and reclaim our national liberation institutions ourselves for ourselves. This reorientation in consciousness has been pivotal. We have not liberated Palestine, so we are not requiring of ourselves to create either a government or a state. The aim is simpler and more profound: to determine for ourselves together, collectively, our strategy for liberation and return. And since it is the only principle that puts popular sovereignty at its core, it is therefore the only truly revolutionary one.

During the previous era when the resistance organizations captured the PLO institutions from the notables and elites in the late 1960s, it functioned according to the ethos of the time, based upon the model employed by national

liberation movements worldwide in the anti-colonial struggle for liberation. This means that those traditional organizing features of the period – underground resistance movements, unions, and mass institutional representation, was broadly popular and representative, and certainly legitimate. This is far from the case today. The PLO is empty of both the spirit and the will of the masses of struggling Palestinians. For example, most of our young people don't belong to any party, unlike the previous generation who filled the parties with their energy, commitment, and service, and gave the revolution its mandate. Most people belonged to one or more of the unions. In this way the PNC reflected a popular mandate. Today's demands of direct enfranchisement of every Palestinian through democratic voting, constituency based, are reflective of this same principle of popular sovereignty, but expressed through the forms that are legitimate and collective today. And actually the issue here is both intrinsic and instrumental, for it is the only model that can work. A PNC based on factional quotas is not representative of the people, and only a directly elected national parliament can make the platforms and strategies of liberation that can represent the general will. So the demand is direct, and simple, and manageable. We have done it before, and we can easily do it again.

### Seif Dana

I disagree that Palestinians had effectively organized themselves in a transnational governing body in the form of the PLO and the PNC. The PLO and the PNC were dominated since 1968 by wealthy members of the Palestinian community in Kuwait and the oil producing Arab states and formed the backbone of Fatah. For example, Arafat's employment at the public work ministry in Kuwait put him in touch with the members of the wealthiest Palestinian community in exile, some of whom played important roles in Palestinian politics and PLO institutions since 1968.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the PLO's first regime after the 1967 war, an interim chair of the executive committee, Yehya Hammoudeh, began an effort to reorganize the Palestine National Council with active participation of guerilla organizations that have just declared a strategy of armed struggle. Hammoudeh's efforts together with strong influence from Fatah would result in an agreement that favored Fatah. The new Palestine National Council would consist of 100 members distributed as follows: 38 members for Fatah, 10 for the Popular Front, 20 members for the Palestine Liberation Army, 3 for the popular and civil organizations (students, workers, and women), and 29 independents.

During the February 1-4, 1969 PLO's 5th Palestine National Council's meeting, Fatah and the PFLP failed to reach an agreement regarding power sharing and control of the PLO, and the PFLP decided to boycott the meeting, insisting instead that "the existing PLO be completely dismantled to give all resistance movements equal voice in the leadership of the armed struggle." (Smith 1984: 195). Fatah took control of the PLO's key positions and Yasser Arafat was selected as the head of the PLO executive committee (Jamal 2005: 19). In effect, the privilege and power baton traditional elite relinquished was passed to Fatah's leadership and their supporters.

Fatah's encroachment and control of the PLO was a significant political transformation in the history of the Palestinian National Movement, in which the orientation of the PLO's agenda and even charter will have significant political and social impacts on the Palestinian national movement as a whole. Fatah's control of the PLO's key positions "gave the movement (Fatah) an advantage in the contest for supremacy within the Palestinian national movement. This step by the more conservative and pragmatic members of the national elite led to the marginalization of the other segment, which was more secular and more radical in its social views" (Jamal 2005: 19). So, The PLO (and PNC) was a powerful apparatus used to justify, or attenuate, the agenda of the right wing of the Palestinian movement.

The quest of the group that dominated the PLO and Fatah from the beginning was the establishment of a state. Fatah accepted and supported of the idea of entity (kiyan); "the establishment of a Palestinian revolutionary authority in the

parts of Palestine that were put under Arab control after 1948 as an initial national step toward the liberation of all Palestine" (Filistinuna cited in Jamal 2005: 18) in the late 1950s, two decades before the ten-point plan of 1974.

Social, political, and economic transformations within the Palestinian communities, especially in exile, transformed the notion of a mini state (kiyan) from a treasonable notion into a 'national necessity'. The failure of the Palestinian elite to integrate into the Arab countries, and assimilate their growing economic power with the rising Arab elite in the oil producing countries, despite being accepted at the beginning, was the root cause underlying the quest for a political entity. This period of the history of the Palestinian national movement and PLO demonstrates not only the effective control and power the Palestinian elite in exile had on the PLO, but also the nature of the PLO as a revolutionary organization. The refugees, however, could not and did not integrate from the beginning.

#### Naseer Aruri

Is the situation reversible? Can the PLO return from its status as a virtual regime to a national liberation movement? Perhaps not with the same leadership the PA should remain with powers as a large municipality. Nothing more. The PLO, which has lost its structure, must be rebuilt.

One of the tragic mistakes is that we didn't focus on the demand for the right to self-determination that encompasses everything. Instead, they concentrated on the idea of a state. A state? Netanyahu, Obama and Ariel Sharon also talked about a state, without land, water and borders. Everything is enclaves. Dr. Mamdouh Akr, head of a major human rights organization in the occupied territories put it this way: "As far as I'm concerned, they can call that an empire. I can feel the seeds of change. There are demonstrations in the villages, the BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel], the boycott on settlement products, defying the PA on the Goldstone report. What has happened in Tunisia and Egypt will expedite the process of change, revitalize the Palestinian cause and bring it back to where it belongs - not to a government or a "state," but as a movement of national liberation." I would add: "...as a representative movement of national liberation: Today, US imperialism and hegemony are on the rise. Israel is governed by Iron Wall adherents, and thus unrestrained. The Arab states, which were inept in 1948, have been down right complicit. Egypt and Jordan not only enforced the Israeli siege on Gaza civilians, but they also provided training camps to the new quislings, in order to enable them to do the job of the Israeli army, and camouflage the occupation.

But this collaboration will be gone, no doubt, particularly after the great Arab Revolt of the spring 2011. This Arab awakening, which is still ongoing, is bound to reverse the earlier trends and create a milieu of emancipation and liberation. Egypt is no longer a symbol of subservience and collaboration; its revolution has already placed it on the path of Arab nationalism.

At this juncture, one hopes that a regional milieu would create a more suitable environment for turning complicity back to resistance (perhaps the ongoing resistance in the form of BDS, and other means of non-violent struggle, together with serious efforts at unification of Fateh and Hamas. The backbone however, would have to be the non-violent mobilization. It would have to serve as the framework for the new resistance, the rebuilding of new institutions and the injection of democratic representation.-not that which governed the previous recruitment by appointment and the balancing of factions (fasail) in which Abu Ammar played the principal role.

#### Sherene Seikaly

I would agree with Seif Dana that Palestinian elites played a dominant role in the PLO and PNC. I would also emphasize that the character of those elites necessarily shifted and that is an important question to further explore. Additionally, it is also important to trace when and how Palestinian refugees constituted and challenged Palestinian

politics. From today's standpoint, the PLO's turn to accepting a two-state solution and its recognition of 242 (the language of which reduces the Palestinian struggle to that of nameless refugees) are critical turning points, when the PLO's ostensible base, Palestinian refugees, became marginal to the very terms of the struggle.

## **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

### Karma Nabulsi

I would like to add some historical comments about the PLO. I raise these now because I believe that a clear understanding of our past can help us better confront our many present challenges; a fair appraisal of the revolutionary elements in our history can certainly help us to organize revolutionary action and thought in the future. Too many black legends are propagated about the history of the Palestinian revolution. The remarkable world of that revolution has been presented to our young people as being nothing more than a series of betrayals, corrupt acts, and nasty leaderships. Besides its inaccuracy, this alienates Palestinian youth from their own history, and creates a demobilizing atmosphere, guided as it is by the principle that everything was always wrong and nothing was ever right. Such narratives negate all the sacrifices, everyday heroism, and positive elements that flourished in the Palestinian revolution (pre-Oslo Fateh included), and especially of the contribution and actions of the tens of thousands of cadres it was comprised of.

First, it is not accurate to argue that the "state discourse or the two state solution" had been hegemonic within Fateh since the late 1950's. This claim relies on a single quote from an article in the magazine *Filastinuna*, taken out of context, and presented in a secondary source that itself has a very problematic teleological reading of Palestinian resistance. Any serious reader of *Filastinuna* will notice that it advanced an absolute and unquestionable commitment to the idea of total liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea. Fateh at that time believed that the liberation struggle was to be led by the Palestinian people from Gaza and the West Bank, the Palestinian areas that were under Egyptian and Jordanian administration. Those that spoke of a Palestinian *kayan* were interested in a fighting entity that could mobilize the entirety of the people in the battle for liberation. That is partly why they used the word *kayan* (entity) not *dawla* (state). Those interested in understanding Fateh's ideas in the fifties should go back to the original sources, the two most important being *Bayan Harakatuna* (Our Movement's Manifesto) and *Haikal al-Binaa al-Thawri* (The Structure of Revolutionary Building). The first goal of Fateh was outlined in its founding bayan without any ambiguity: "the liberation of Palestine in a total manner, and liquidating the Zionist occupying state politically, militarily, socially, and intellectually." Every other Fateh principle, argument, article, pamphlet, or book from this period was built on this principle.

Actually, the same goes for Fateh of the sixties. Fateh was the first to call for armed struggle during this period. To call it "right wing," is not entirely accurate, as it included numerous leftist (as well as rightist) elements that were committed to that principle. In fact, Fateh was the closest thing to a broad "national front" at the time, inspired in particular by the Maoist experience in China and by Ho Chi Minh's example in Vietnam (for intellectual articulations of this fact see the following 1960's Fateh publications: *Al-Tajruba al-Vietnamia* and *Al-Tajruba al-Seenia*, as well as *Tahreer al-Aqtar al-Muhtala*; for its concrete application check the lists of major cadres that were active during this period, reflecting communist, nationalist and Ba'athist as well as Muslim Brotherhood backgrounds). This is not to defend Fateh of today by any means, but it is to salvage the revolutionary legacy of the movement. Rejecting Oslo and its defeatist logic should not amount to rejecting the history of the Palestinian revolution - indeed, reclaiming the history of the revolution should be a matter of concern for anyone serious about emphasising the importance of revolutionary struggle in the present and future.

Those who have experienced the revolutionary spirit of the past find claims that “the PLO and the PNC were dominated since 1968 by wealthy members of the Palestinian community in Kuwait and the oil producing Arab states and formed the backbone of Fatah” as quite alien. Sure, the Palestinian community, including the bourgeoisie and the businessmen in Kuwait played an important role in financing Fateh (as well as the PFLP by the way). But to claim that this amounts to “wealthy” or “Kuwaiti” dominance over the PLO and PNC is not only inaccurate but incorrect. Most of the Fateh leadership and cadres came from families that were out of the orbit of the traditional politics of the notables. And in fact, the 1960’s witnessed quite a shift in the Fateh leadership from the Gulf based group to those located in Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon.

As for the reasons behind the PFLP’s initial attitude to the PLO, these are complicated. There was a traditional mistrust of the PLO on the part of the groups that were committed to armed struggle (indeed, Fateh’s entry to the PLO was itself made with hesitance and after much internal debate). There were also differences over the percentage of seats that each party would get (the PFLP demanded a larger quota than Fateh was prepared to give, that did not represent its diminished weight in the post-Karameh period). Those interested in the debates of the period should go back to PFLP publications from those days rather than western secondary literature on the topic. A good sense can be gained from the PFLP’s 1969 pamphlet “Al-Jabha al-Sha’biya Li Tahreer Filasteen Tuwadeh Mawqifaha Min al-Ishtirak fi al-Majlis al-Watani wa Al-Lajna al-Tanfithiya wa Qiyadat al-Kifah al-Musalaha” (The PFLP Clarifies its Position Regarding Participation in the PNC and the Executive Committee and the Leadership in the Armed Struggle). The evolution of these positions can also be seen in the post-Black September period in such writings as Al-Bayan al-Siyassi al-Muqadam ila al-Dawra al-Tasi’a Lil Majlis al-Watani al-Filasteeni.” (The Political Communiqué Submitted to the 9th Session of the PNC) which explains why the PFLP participated in the PNC for the first time. The PFLP’s history with the PNC has ebbed and flowed, but it has always accepted the principles of the PNC, and for many years it has regretted its early positions on it. Certainly, those positions were not shared by the entirety of the Palestinian left (including the left-faction within Fateh and the DFLP).

What is important to emphasize, however, is that whereas the PNC at the time operated on the basis of “revolutionary legitimacy” (accepted as a concept and guiding principle by PFLP, Fateh, DFLP and everyone else at the time and common to anti-colonial liberation movements of the period), what is relevant today is to shift the basis of representation to “electoral legitimacy,” by enfranchising all Palestinians including those living in the places of refuge and exile. Our strength does not lie in either negating or disposing of our entire political heritage, but rather in reclaiming its proper resources and strengthening it through common principles and purposes. Structures like the PNC and the PLO were established after a long and arduous process of struggle with the Israelis, the Arab regimes, and the western states, and most importantly, in spite of them. These structures afford Palestinians struggling for liberation and return the necessary mechanism for representation - once re-energised with our people’s popular will - in spite of their current emptiness and unrepresentative character.

#### Seif Dana

I argued that the PLO did not only fail, but enfolded the seeds of failure from the beginning in its political thoughts, structure, and social orientation and background of its leadership. My concern in this very short exercise (to call for reconstructing the history of the Palestinian national movement (PNM) and the PLO) is to explain the political present of the PNM and its leading force, the PLO. Failure alone not only does not suffice neither explaining the tragic conclusion of the PLO venture nor the political present. It does not provide any insights for any promising alternative future. In other words, my concern with an alternative past is not to explain the causes of the failure per se but also to seek principles of a view for an alternative future (this, of course, requires more space and effort than this very short synopsis).

I inserted the term “tragic” above to characterize the PLO’s failure in order to highlight the amazing heroism and great sacrifices of the Palestinian people and the cadres and members of the PLO’s factions despite the disastrous outcome. In this sense, there is a need to distinguish between history (which explains the present, or should be reconstructed to do so should we continue to seek the envisioned promising future of the first generation of Palestinian rebels) and historical literature. Slipping into idealism and holding on to the romantic optics to perceive the PLO and the history of the PLO’s venture might have been necessary in the early period of the Palestinian revolution --like any revolution at the beginning (David Scott’s “Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment” reading of C.L.R James account of the Haitian Revolution in the “The Black Jacobins” might be useful to consider). Retroactively, however, it is possible now to see that underneath the shrill of revolutionary lexis of defiance, there was always a tacit, and sometimes explicit, willingness to compromise and accept a political settlement to the contrary. Both Arafat’s 13 November 1974 UN speech and 15 November 1988 Declaration of Independence of the State of Palestine are good examples. (I dealt with both in more details elsewhere in Arabic in the “State Discourse” and “Tragedy of the PLO”. We live in a new era, however, that requires highly critical lenses to perceive the PLO experience in order for the liberation, not state, scheme to remain alive.

In short, given what seems to many as an undisputed outcome, or failure, (unless we can pinpoint concrete success or if we consider the establishment of the Palestinian Authority as a historical achievement) any recounted history might show that, at its kernel, the PLO germinated conditions and enfolded forces that spearheaded its demise. The PLO failed because of factors similar to those that rendered earlier independence and development attempts in the Arab homeland (and elsewhere) ephemeral, calamitously departing the nationalism and independence age. Similarly, the PLO’s failure was immaculate. Post-Nakba rising social forces that took over the PLO, led a fundamental reconstruction of the whole political and cultural landscape underlying the PLO’s national and democratic liberation cause.

Changing global, regional and local structural conditions coincided with the highly pragmatic, but hegemonic nonetheless, Palestinian elite to produce the co-optation of, once, the most spectacular manifestation of revolutionary vigor in the modern history of the Middle East. An evener, an alternative to dwarf the effects of the inescapable social nature of the leading forces the post 1948 war realities sprouted, was not missing and the elites’ ascendance to and grip on power was not without a fight internally and beyond the PLO’s institutions (e.g., Fatah vs. PFLP; PLO vs. the 1970s “National Front” and “National Guidance Committee” in the West Bank and Gaza). Failure, however, was a matter of history, not in spite of it. With the exception of few a cases, literature on the Palestine question has ignored this highly important dimension of the conflict within the PLO (see Habash 1998; Kazziha 1975; Gresh 1985; Tamari 2003).

However, this is not and can’t be the end of the story of the Palestinian struggle. Given that the specter of Palestine appears to be occupying a central status in the ongoing Arab revolts that definitely signify the beginning of a new era, one should remain highly optimistic. The beginning should be a shift in the political discourse towards restoring the original and true view of the conflict (anti-colonial struggle rather than border conflict), a discourse of liberation rather than state. This is a great step.