



Chapter Three

Lost in Transition

The Palestinian National Movement After Oslo

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The signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993 inaugurated a new chapter of Palestinian politics that saw drastic changes in the national movement's structures, functions, perceptions, and political vocabulary and behavior. These drastic changes profoundly impacted on the ability of the Palestinian body politic to function as an independent anti-colonial liberation movement united in struggle for self-determination and obstructed its role as the representative body of Palestinian national aspirations. In fact, the reality of the Palestinian national movement after nearly a quarter century of the Oslo process is one lacerated by multiple forms of fragmentations, divisions, and conflicting agendas increasingly defined by narrow factional interests for power and privileges. Despite the ongoing deterioration and weakness, neither the existing political forces have sought to present alternative strategies to rebuild the national movement, nor have new political and social movements emerged to introduce new dynamics that may challenge the status quo. Israel, which systemically cleared the ground for the Oslo reality, has thus been able to deepen its colonization of the OPT, further besiege the fragmented Palestinian communities—by geography, politics and ever-increasing class and social divisions—and to intensify its “facts on the ground” to abort any chance for a two-state solution, which ostensibly was the ultimate goal of the Oslo Accords (see chapter by Diana Buttu in this book).

Two main perspectives explain the impact of the Oslo process on the national movement. The first, which is the most dominant, conceives the Oslo process as a *failure*. According to this perspective, the Oslo Accords were initially designed to introduce a new era of peaceful settlement based on a two state solution, but things went wrong and the peace process failed. This “failure” caused deep harm to Palestinian national aspirations and



rights, and led to negative consequences for the Palestinian national fabric. The blame is pinned on manifold factors: the flawed implementation of the Oslo Accords, the excessive power asymmetries between the Palestinians and Israel, the weakness and miscalculation of the Palestinian leadership, Israel's ongoing colonization practices, and the US's unconditional support for Israel.¹ In contrast, the second perspective conceives the Oslo process as a *success* if Israel's real intentions are properly understood. In this regard, Israel's real intention was to consolidate its colonial project and further its control over Palestinian life, while simultaneously creating the conditions to incapacitate and disarm the Palestinian national movement.² Accordingly, the Oslo process has successfully paved the way for the current situation where the numbers of settlers in the occupied West Bank have more than doubled and Israel's colonial control over land, resources and borders has been institutionalized without effective resistance. Shortly after the signing of the Oslo agreements in 1993, the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said noted the extent to which the agreements are inherently flawed and argued that the Oslo trap constituted "an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles."³ In fact, the Oslo framework constituted a successful method of counterinsurgency because it has fragmented what was left of the Palestinian body politic.⁴ Now, after more than two decades of the Oslo Accords, Palestinians have the problem of their struggle facing the risk of being a "failed national movement."⁵

While failure of national liberation movements is hardly new, the failure of the Palestinian national movement is unique and unprecedented in the history of liberation movements. After decades of acting as a leading anti-colonial movement in the world—with success in building influential organizational structures characterized by ideological and political pluralism, and a revolutionary transnational reach that inspired and attracted supporters from distant parts of the world—the struggle and countless sacrifices that were made have ended in catastrophic failure whereby none of its stated objectives have been realized. While the seeds of failure could be attributed to a set of historical and structural factors since the formation of the PLO in the 1960s, the most crucial factor is undoubtedly the capitulation and self-defeat of the PLO as seen in how the 25 years of the Oslo process progressed with its humiliating terms and far-reaching consequences on all aspects of Palestinian life. Although the Palestinian political field today continues to be described as a national liberation movement, the highly restrictive Oslo framework and its related mechanisms of institutional, political and economic control has led the national movement to abandon vital features and tasks integrally associated with liberation movements.



The adverse consequences of Oslo on the national movement are numerous, but three main features can explain much of the ongoing crisis:

First, it is unprecedented that an anti-colonial liberation organization voluntarily accepts to dissolve its capacity and embrace a state-building agenda under ongoing conditions of military occupation and settler-colonialism it has fought against for decades. The Oslo Accords redefined Palestinian-Israeli relations as stipulated by the mutual recognition between the PLO and the Israeli government in 1993. This mutual recognition institutionalized the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, evidenced in the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the formation of official channels of political, economic, security and civil coordination with the Israeli authorities, all of which were governed according to Israeli conditions.⁶ The establishment of the PA as the center of Palestinian politics encapsulated the wider PLO force and its political pluralism in a narrowly defined institutional structure, limited in its resources, besieged in its geography and governed by an exclusionary politics. This pushed the PA to be effectively exposed to Israeli pressure, which in turn left the Palestinian leadership with little room for maneuver and insubstantial political independence. As a result, the Palestinian leadership lost its capacity to lead the national movement, and instead it became an acquiescent elite whose survival is dependent on Israeli terms and conditions.

Second, the Oslo framework implanted the seeds of divisions and fragmentations within the Palestinian body politic and society at large, which culminated in the Hamas-Fatah division in 2007. This internal Palestinian schism is not only the consequence of factional conflict over the “legitimate” ruling party of the PA, but also demonstrates the divisive effects of the Oslo process along territorial, political, institutional, social and ideological lines. The continuing division of the Palestinian political system has not empowered Hamas over Fatah nor vice versa, but has further damaged what was left of the fragile national unity, and provided Israel with a comfortable position from which to intensify the colonization of the OPT.⁷ Furthermore, the West Bank, which became the favored site for international donors following the Hamas-Fatah schism, has witnessed an ever-increasing social and class division between the PA political and economic elite and the population at large. The PA elite has largely benefited from the reality introduced by Oslo, where international aid, privileges granted by Israel, monopolies over resources, involvement in private businesses, and corruption are major sources of personal enrichment.⁸

Third, the Oslo process exposed the OPT to systematic intervention by international donors, financial institutions and international NGOs, ostensibly justified under the banners of peacebuilding and statebuilding. This allowed





new patterns of external intervention effectively to influence internal Palestinian affairs through projecting “a variety of social and economic objectives and instrumentalities, underpinned by substantial commitments of financial support.”⁹ The goal has been to enforce political stability and security, and to maintain western and Israeli geopolitical interests, all of which has come under the rubric of “supporting the peace process.” These forms of international intervention have influenced the national movement at two levels. First, the state-building exercise, as embodied in the PA, has deprived the Palestinian body politic of the capacity to produce plans and programs according to the national perspective and local needs. Almost all of the PA designs, including its institutional framework, mode of governance, neoliberal economic policies and security apparatus are a reflection of donors’ diktats and conditions. Second, local civil society has been restructured towards an NGO sector to carry out predefined tasks in service of the “peace process.” International donors, therefore, enforced the Oslo terms as a conditional political framework to which local civil society ought to refer for redefining their relations and interactions with the political dynamic on the ground. Thus, a large number of local organizations had to adapt to the perquisites of the Oslo political equation by replacing major political assignments previously associated with the dynamics of anti-colonial struggle with ostensibly apolitical approaches based on the politics of peacebuilding.¹⁰

This chapter will explore these aspects of the dramatic transformation of the Palestinian political field after Oslo. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first focuses on the ways in which the establishment of the PA contributed to the deterioration and weakening of the Palestinian national movement. The second section shows how the advent of the PA led to the disintegration of the PLO as a national liberation organization and the dismantling of its capacity as a representative body of the Palestinian people. The remaining three sections highlight the post-Oslo transformation of the three largest factions that represent the different political and ideological angles of Palestinian politics: Fatah representing the secular nationalist strand, Hamas as a representative of political Islam, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) as the leftist force.

THE DEMISE OF THE PLO

The acceptance of the PLO leadership to establish the PA in 1994 and to transfer the center of gravity of Palestinian politics into the OPT was motivated by the desire to transform the Palestinian struggle away from its revolutionary character into a pragmatic state-building program. Accordingly,





the advent of the PA effectively pronounced the demise of the PLO. While the legitimacy of the PA is primarily gained from the PLO, the PA has marginalized the role of the PLO, effectively transformed it into a dysfunctional organization deprived of its main functions and roles. In theory, the PA was supposed to operate as a governing institutional branch subordinated to the PLO and its central decisions. In practice, however, the establishment of the PA marked the culmination of the PLO's internal and external crises, and obstructed its historical mandate as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. (See chapter by Jamil Hilal in this book.)

A primary striking consequence of the establishment of the PA has been the systematic marginalization of the PLO as a broad political structure characterized by political and ideological pluralism in favor of a narrowly defined semi-autonomous entity, besieged in its geography and political maneuvering, and dominated by an exclusionary political view subjected to terms imposed by Israel. The weighty shift towards the PA as the center of gravity for Palestinian politics instead of the PLO, has altered understandings of the nature of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and self-determination.¹¹ The PLO historically functioned as an umbrella organization under which the various factions operated for the cause of national liberation. The later dominant position of the PA over the PLO has radically changed this track towards formalized practices of state-building and institution-building, and prioritized service provision and the administration of daily life in the OPT.

While still internationally recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, 25 years of the PA's predominance has substantially impeded the PLO's capacity to represent all Palestinians worldwide. The PA has also excluded Palestinian communities in exile from having any meaningful contribution in formulating national policy.¹² The issue of representation in the Palestinian context is associated with the principle of the struggle for self-determination. Against this backdrop, the UN recognized the PLO in 1974 as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The PLO was the only national liberation movement in the world to enjoy such international status. This status allowed the organization to speak and act on behalf of Palestinians, spread its presence worldwide through establishing representative offices, entering into international agreements and representing Palestinians at the UN and other international and regional organizations.

When the PA—which only represents Palestinians under its jurisdiction in the OPT—came to monopolize Palestinian politics, it essentially aborted the PLO's representative function, thus leaving millions of diaspora Palestinians unrepresented. One indication of this shift is the gradual transformation of PLO representative offices into embassies representing the PA or the “State of Palestine,” thus effectively ending the PLO presence in many countries



around the world. Likewise, when the PA decided to upgrade its status at the UN in September 2011, many legal analysts warned about the consequences of such a move on the PLO representative status in the UN. It was feared that a Palestinian statehood status would only represent Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza, and that “could jeopardize the effective and collective representation of all the Palestinian people—the Diaspora, refugees, Palestinians citizens of Israel and the Palestinians in the OPT—both inside and outside of the UN system.”¹³

Another major aspect of the problematic PA-PLO relationship has been the overlapping jurisdictions and the absence of separation of powers and mandates. This dilemma is manifested in the elite domination over key overlapping positions within both the PLO and the PA without an internally elected mandate, which distorted the distinction between the PLO and the PA. The president of the PA is the chairman of the PLO, and most of the leadership positions of the PLO and the PA are intersecting in a manner that often creates confusion between the two organizations. It has become a regular occurrence to see a member of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) in a key position in the PA, or a member of the PLO executive committee occupying a leading post in the PA. Such a situation has encouraged a conflict of interest and therefore various corruption practices have spread across the PA and the PLO. Furthermore, the elite overlapping positions between the PLO and the PA go against the PLO’s internal regulations that forbid combining the membership of the PLO National Council with another PLO position. The PLO Basic Law also forbids members of the PLO executive committee from other employment. The absence of effective mechanisms for accountability and democratic procedures within the PLO has deepened the crisis of legitimacy.

The deterioration of the PLO has been accompanied by repeated calls and initiatives to reform it and revive its centrality in Palestinian political life as an inclusive and representative body politic for all Palestinian factions and institutions. One central objective of these initiatives is to create a democratic and balanced representation of all factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are not currently part of the PLO. Another objective is to reform the PLO apparatuses through engaging Palestinians in the process, wherever they reside. Nevertheless, attempts to reform the PLO have persistently failed to achieve any tangible result. While the PLO’s revolutionary heritage has been exploited by the PA elites to legitimize their positions and exclusionary politics, which led the PLO to be effectively dysfunctional, many Palestinians believe that restructuring the PLO and reviving its role as a leading, unifying and representative organization for all Palestinians is a prerequisite for rebuilding the national movement. For them, despite the misery of its post-Oslo



status, the PLO shaped modern Palestinian national identity and legitimized the Palestinian struggle for liberation and self-determination at the regional and international levels.

Perhaps understandably, throughout the post-Oslo years little thought has been given to the possibility of establishing an alternative political framework that surpasses the PLO. However, the PLO's prolonged state of idleness and the persistent inability or unwillingness by the Palestinian leadership and factions to revive the umbrella organization, have driven some to call for the establishment of "alternative democratic leadership and to think collectively regarding how to construct a new national movement while preserving the assets that the Palestinian struggle built in previous decades."¹⁴ While such calls are nascent and ambiguous, and which so far have not been developed into a strategic vision or practical plan, they might yet gain broader popularity, and new structures and leadership may emerge beyond the PLO.

FROM A NATIONAL MOVEMENT TO AN ACQUIESCENT AUTHORITY

As the PA emerged as the institutional embodiment of the Oslo process, it was forced to function according to various conditions and restrictions superimposed by the agreements. The PA thereafter established itself as the dominant political force in the OPT and as the official representative of Palestinian politics to the outside world. However, the PA's legitimacy was not supported by a broad Palestinian consensus, but rather its very existence and continuity were a result of a "process" that depended on Israel's consent, international diplomatic recognition, and donor financial support. Thus, the PA's dominance over Palestinian politics made it a driving force behind the dramatic transformation of the Palestinian political field.

The PA was designed to function as an interim administrative body responsible for overseeing civil and security affairs in Palestinian densely populated areas (Area A) in the West Bank and Gaza. This situation was governed by the logic of gradualism, which was translated into a transitional period of five years until a final status agreement with Israel was reached. All major issues that constitute the core of the conflict such as the status of Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements built on the occupied territories of 1967, the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and control over borders, were postponed to the final status agreement. With the collapse of the Camp David negotiations in 2000 and the subsequent events, particularly the second intifada, the Oslo process was declared dead.¹⁵ However, despite the fact that the Oslo process has reached a dead-end, its conditions and manifestations are still powerfully





evident on the ground, especially through the continuous existence of the PA and the implementation of policies strictly defined by the Oslo framework.

There is broad agreement that the advent of the PA has been central to understanding much of the crisis and weakness experienced by the Palestinian national movement in the past two decades. The PA has brought with it the seeds of divisions and fragmentations that profoundly impacted on the multiple structures and functions of the Palestinian political field, and reduced the Palestinian struggle for liberation and self-determination to a mere demand of statehood on parts of the territory occupied in 1967. These factors are either a direct result of the Oslo process and the various limitations it imposed on the PA mandate and functions, or are associated with the very nature of the PA, its characteristics and policies.

The new geography introduced by the Oslo Accords has had a profound effect on the Palestinian political field and its ability to maintain a solid connection between its various units, institutions and constituencies inside the OPT and in the diaspora. On the one hand, the establishment of the PA meant a geographic shift in the centre of gravity away from the Palestinian diaspora to the “Palestinian center” in the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁶ Such a move encapsulated the whole set of Palestinian leadership and institutions in a limited geographical context, fully governed by Israeli control over land and borders, and effectively suffocated by Jewish settlements and the closure regime.

On the other hand, the PA was set up to administer limited and non-contiguous areas in the West Bank and Gaza, mostly towns and cities that are densely populated. In accordance with the interim agreement, the West Bank was divided into three distinct areas with different jurisdictions and administrative and security arrangements (A, B, C). Area A consists of large towns and cities under full civilian and security control by the PA, and comprises roughly 18% of the West Bank. Area B consists of mostly Palestinian rural areas and is under PA administration and joint Palestinian-Israeli security control, and it comprises roughly 22 percent of the West Bank. Area C, under full Israeli military and administrative control, includes fertile agricultural lands, natural resources and water aquifers.¹⁷ This has augmented territorial fragmentation and consolidated Israel’s control over the movements of people and goods, and facilitated Israel’s imposition of various restrictions such as closure, curfews and other mechanisms of control. As a result, the geographical reality introduced by Oslo has placed the West Bank in a sophisticated and all-encompassing “matrix of control.”¹⁸

In addition, the PA was designed to function as a central institutional channel through which the Oslo political, economic and security conditions, as well as international donors’ visions, are transmitted and enforced over the Palestinian polity and society.¹⁹ International intervention through technical





and financial support to the PA is strictly associated with the Oslo framework and is often justified in terms of peacebuilding and state-building (see chapter by Mandy Turner in this book). This has brought the OPT into the forefront of internationally-promoted experiments of governance, social engineering, economic development, security and institution-building, which have been advanced by the highest-level practitioners, donor agencies and international financial institutions. Such an extensive combination of post-conflict/neo-colonial set of experiments has transformed the OPT, particularly the West Bank, into a “laboratory of technologies of control.”²⁰ In such a context, the PA capacity to produce social, economic and institutional plans based on the real requirements of the local context as well as independent political decision-making has been largely eroded. Moreover, the strategies and practices of international intervention do not challenge the colonial order, but rather appear to have “complemented and meshed with the structures of domination and repression in subtle but crucial ways.”²¹

Moreover, international intervention was accompanied by a major change in the political economy of the OPT, which is particularly associated with the effects of neoliberal policies pursued by the PA. In addition to economic dependency on Israel, the PA’s neoliberal policies have created another structural form of dependency on international aid and foreign investments. This has also subjected Palestinian economic planning to international donors’ diktats (and with the involvement of Israel) in determining various aspects of Palestinian economic strategy.

Neoliberalism found its way to the OPT from the outset of the Oslo process and the establishment of the PA which, since then, has faithfully been echoing donors’ recommendations for a neoliberal institution-building and good governance schema.²² Unlike other former colonized countries, the PA represents an unprecedented case in embracing neoliberalism from the very beginning of its establishment. In fact, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and other donor agencies played a leading role in guiding the newly-established PA. However, the development of these policy prescriptions for the OPT began even before the PA was officially established, when the World Bank issued a report in 1993 titled *Developing the Occupied Territories: An Investment in Peace* which emphasized the role of free market, private sector, export-led economic development and good governance in guiding the Palestinian economy.²³

The PA’s neoliberal turn accelerated after President Mahmoud Abbas appointed Salam Fayyad as prime minister in 2007. Fayyad’s neoliberal re-arrangement took it one stage further due to its technical professionalism, systemic implementation and acceleratory dynamic. Hanieh notes that the PA’s commitment to such a massive and rapid implementation of neoliberal



policies exceeds measures imposed by IFIs on any other state in the region.²⁴ This includes the promotion of private sector-led development, export-led industrial zoning, the encouragement of foreign investments and finance, the expansion of banking deregulation and public debt, and the adoption of a regressive taxation regime. Furthermore, Fayyad's neoliberal implementation coincided with Israel's strategy of "economic peace" introduced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2008. This produced a harmonious economic dynamic and encouraged joint economic ventures to flourish between Palestinian and Israeli businesses within Israel's colonial framework.²⁵

This neoliberal dynamic has created a beneficial reality for certain political-economic elites whose interest is tied to maintaining the political status quo. This elite enjoys considerable influence over PA decision-making and it operates in close cooperation with the Israeli authorities and businesses. In addition, this elite considers the emergence of new counter political movements as a threat to its privileges, thus it often relies on Palestinian security to secure political stability and protect its businesses and assets.

Furthermore, authoritarian politics has been an integral feature of the PA, which has critically impacted on the development of political thought and ideological pluralism in the Palestinian political field. The centralization of political and economic power, and the repression of critical currents, has prevented the emergence and development of alternative visions and structures as well as paralysed the roles of existing political actors in feeding the Palestinian political field with new ideas, perceptions and dynamics.

The logic behind the creation and continuity of the PA is that it ought to be strictly governed by a compliant political class that fully accepts and implements conditions enforced by the Oslo Accords. The survival of the PA political class, or the PA elite, has become organically linked to the complex network of political and economic interests and privileges that became deeply rooted in the PA institutions. Thus, in order to preserve its interests, the PA elite monopolized the PA centres of powers such as political decision-making, public institutions, financial resources and the means of violence. This has resulted in an exclusionary politics that depends on a variety of techniques of co-optation and suppression.

The PA underwent two distinct phases of authoritarianism: the first is represented by Yasser Arafat's politics, and the second phase began with the post-Arafat uneasy transfer of power to Mahmoud Abbas and his narrow coalition of business elite and technocrats.

In the first phase of PA authoritarianism, political and economic power rested almost exclusively in the person of Arafat, first president of the PA and chairman of the PLO. He pursued a governance route similar to his ruling-style legacy in the PLO. While the institutional structure of the PA



was initially supposed to be organized along the Western liberal paradigm of state-building, during the 1990s the state-building process was implemented in a disorganized fashion through ad hoc decisions made by Arafat who ignored recommendations made by his professional team.²⁶ Israel, the US and international donors turned a blind eye to those aspects of Arafat's governance as they supported strengthening his position against the opposition and affirming his control over the nascent PA. Accordingly, Arafat effectively dominated executive power and manipulated the legislative and judicial spheres. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) is a case in point. It was formed to purportedly carry out the functions of a democratically-elected parliament such as debating and passing legislation, and monitoring the executive branch. However, in practice the executive branch (i.e. Arafat) ignored various laws and instead depended on presidential decrees to advance his policies.

After Arafat's death in 2004, Mahmoud Abbas was elected as the PA president in 2005 and became the leader of Fatah and the PLO. Abbas's politics differed from that of Arafat in the sense that they were considered to be more compatible with both US and Israeli interests.²⁷ In addition, unlike Arafat, whose authoritarian character depended on his charismatic leadership, revolutionary legacy, and a broad consensus by the Fatah party over his leadership, Abbas's authoritarianism is based on networks of business and technocratic elite, and centralized control over the security branch. Furthermore, Abbas's authoritarianism is closely linked and coordinated with the US and Israel through a variety of mechanisms including political and financial backing, and security assistance. This means that the US and Israel are directly complicit in enhancing the PA's autocratic approach. In fact, this period witnessed unparalleled intensification of the level of authoritarianism and the deepening of anti-democratic practices including suppression of political dissidents, journalists and activists.²⁸ This became particularly the case after the series of events that began with the international community's refusal to deal with the democratically-elected government of Hamas in 2006, and the following military takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas in June 2007 that resulted in the institutional and political split between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With international support for Abbas, these series of events marked a major turning point in the development of the PA's authoritarianism, whereby internal repression of political dissidents and assaults on civil and political liberties such as freedom of speech and the press were systemically carried out by PA security forces in close collaboration with Israeli security.

Moreover, the combination of authoritarianism and neoliberalism has promoted the PA's reputation for corruption whereby nepotism, misappropriation of public resources, and misuse of power are rampant within its



ministries. As many as 95 percent of Palestinians living in the OPT believe there is corruption in PA institutions, according to a survey in 2016.²⁹ Similar surveys carried out since the establishment of the PA have persistently shown public mistrust in the PA. Corruption in the context of the PA has contributed to various institutional, economic and social problems, including deepening inequality and harming of the social fabric, but its most alarming impact has been the deep corrupting effect it has caused to the national movement.

The most direct consequence of PA corruption on the national movement is particularly associated with the patron-client system that has constituted the backbone of PA institution-building since the beginning. The way in which the PA patron-client system works involves the systematic exploitation of political power and financial resources for the purpose of securing the hegemonic order. In particular, the PA patron-client system is seen as a powerful tool in three realms: for securing loyalties, reviving the politics of tribalism, and coopting opposition.³⁰ First, the way the PA has managed to secure loyalty among its constituents is largely based on offering access to resources for economic survival rather than persuasion for its political, economic and social programs. In particular, the PA's large public sector has been a vital source for creating dependency, ensuring hegemony and securing loyalties. Second, the PA sought to accommodate large families through recognizing *Mukhtars* (head of tribes) and authorizing them to speak on behalf of their families in order to ensure their loyalty. In this way, the PA revived the politics of tribalism, which had been marginalized by the rise of the national movement in the OPT in the period prior to Oslo. Third, the patron-client system is also used to coopt and naturalize political opposition. A number of political leaders were trapped into this network and incorporated into the PA project, which they initially claimed to reject. These leaders (independents, leftists and Islamists) are offered privileges, advantages and access to prestigious posts in ministries and public institutions in exchange for political loyalty. In fact, some of those coopted personalities have become key actors in PA politics.

Last but not least, security collaboration between the PA and Israel is another aspect that contradicts the basic feature of national liberation. The significance of security to both Israel and the PA can be clearly seen in a number of the principal agreements that were signed in the 1990s, most prominently the Declaration of Principles of 1993, the Cairo Agreement (Oslo II) of 1994, and the Wye River Memorandum of 1998 (see chapter by Diana Buttu in this book). Security has been and remains a defining feature of PA-Israeli relations, which is particularly expressed through the terms of "security coordination."

The security branch is a key institution that plays substantial roles in shaping the PA's character and behaviour. It constitutes an essential mechanism



for consolidating the PA's authoritarian character and enforcing its dominance over the Palestinian political field. The Palestinian security sector today is the most dominant in the PA. It absorbs 44 percent of a total of 145,000 civil servants, and it eats up a sizeable proportion of the PA financial resources, accounting for almost 30 percent–35 percent of the PA annual budget.³¹

The evolution and development of the PA security sector intersects with the dual phases of authoritarianism specified above. The first phase is associated with Arafat's control and direction of the security apparatuses during the 1990s, and the second phase witnessed a fundamental restructuring of security under the presidency of Abbas that began in 2005.

The first phase saw the formation of various competing security apparatuses under the full control of the president that concentrated their operations on internal policing as stipulated by the PA-Israeli agreements. During the 1990s, Israel permitted the PA security sector to quantitatively expand and even surpass the maximum number of 30,000 security personnel as specified by Oslo II. It was estimated that by 1996 the PA employed between 50,000–80,000 security officers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As such the PA became the most heavily policed territory in the world, with an officer-to-resident ratio of 1:50. In the late 1990s, the PA security forces were estimated to amount to a dozen operational branches, a figure which increased to more than 15 by 2004.³²

By the end of the second intifada, the PA security apparatus was destroyed, scattered and left largely dysfunctional by the Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian towns. In this context, rebuilding security constituted a top priority in Abbas's agenda, and ever since he assumed office in 2005, security has been a pillar of his presidency. Abbas wished to transform the Arafatist mode of security—which would sometimes forcefully resist the Israeli military—into a strictly inward-oriented security capable of enforcing stability and providing protection to the PA elite. These two objectives were only attainable through effective coordination with the Israeli security establishment, under the supervision of the US. International donors, particularly the US and the EU, played key roles in the PA's security reform, with a major focus on shaping the PA's security doctrine, training, vetting and strategic planning, and the formation of professional security apparatuses with enhanced capacity for internal policing and "counterterrorism" operations.³³ The Euro-American involvement in restructuring the PA security forces is precisely defined in accordance with Israeli security needs. Indeed, Sayigh argues that "the United States and the European Union, whose rhetoric about promoting democratic development and the rule of law is pious at best, and at worst disingenuous."³⁴ There is a growing agreement among observers that the way international assistance is directed to the Palestinian security forces has created a "police





state.” According to Aisling, “the seed of this deception which was to grow into a new police state in the region was the US and European acquiescence to Israel’s self-definition of its own security needs and by extension, Israel’s definition of the requirements for Palestinian security collaboration.”³⁵

FATAH: THE POLITICS OF ANTI-NATIONAL LIBERATION

The historic handshake between the PLO chairman and head of Fatah, Yasser Arafat, and the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, on the lawn of the White House in 1993 marked the beginning of a new era of transformation for Fatah. One year after the handshake, Arafat and many Fatah affiliates in exile in Tunisia and elsewhere were allowed to return to autonomous parts of the West Bank and Gaza to establish a self-governing authority in accordance with the terms of the Oslo Accords.

Fatah’s weighty involvement in the Oslo compromise marks a turning point in its structure, functions and characteristics which saw it embarking on a transition from a national liberation movement to a quasi-state party preoccupied with building institutions, distributing benefits, and securing hegemony under the ongoing occupation. Indeed, the PA is a Fatah-dominated project: its leadership, returnees and supporters in the OPT have occupied key governmental positions and became the PA ruling elite.³⁶ A significant segment of Fatah cadres and militants have been attracted by opportunities and privileges offered by the PA and became the core of its bureaucracy, its large public sector, and its multiple security apparatuses. Fatah’s multi-sectorial popular organizations that existed prior to Oslo and played vital roles during the first intifada were integrated into the structure of the nascent PA.³⁷ Eventually Fatah became synonymous with the PA itself.

In order to accommodate the requirements of the Oslo political phase, Fatah political discourses became increasingly dominated by pragmatism and moderate political vocabulary. This served to direct public attention toward its state-building project, including emphasis on negotiations, diplomacy, peace-building, institution-building, security and political stability. For many Palestinians, this marks a divergence from Fatah’s early revolutionary principles that put it at the forefront of the Palestinian struggle.

This resulted in a dilemma, given the irreconcilable tensions between the functions of a national liberation movement and a state-building project, which in the Palestinian context has blatantly failed to coexist in harmony. In particular, being entangled in an internationally-designed, Israeli-besieged, and financially-conditioned “national project,” Fatah has lost considerable





ground, and its ability to pursue independent political decisions and effective maneuvering has been gravely undermined.

Fatah's historical dominance over the fate of the Palestinian cause is a result of exclusionary politics that has tended to marginalize and coopt opposition, including critical voices within the movement itself. This logic has been translated into a form of politics employed by the PA that lacks popular participation and representation and which has contributed to its authoritarianism. Furthermore, neopatrimonial networks are a key feature of Fatah's internal hierarchies and its relation with members and the society at large. This has allowed the movement to exploit national institutions for personal ends, to concentrate power in the hands of its senior leadership, to punish dissidents and to control its constituents.

Being ideologically based on Palestinian nationalism in its broadest sense, Fatah's internal fabric is comprised of diverse ideological leanings ranging from leftists to rightists, secularists and conservatives. The movement's diversity paved the way for the emergence of rival trends in pursuit of competing political agendas. Despite these internal contradictions, which occasionally resulted in internal rifts, Fatah has generally maintained internal unity in times of crisis. However, in the Palestinian popular belief, there are considerable differences between the Fatah internal fabric under the leadership of Yasser Arafat and that under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas. Apart from a couple of political rifts within the movement in the 1980s, Arafat's leadership symbolized the movement's cohesiveness and unity. Under Abbas's leadership, the movement has experienced precarious power struggles, particularly his rivalry with Mohammed Dahlan and its polarizing consequences on Fatah bases along personalized, geographical (West Bank, Gaza) and generational ("old guard," "young guard") lines. Originally, Abbas and Dahlan were close allies during the Arafat era. And when he was elected as PA president in 2006, Abbas appointed Dahlan as his adviser on national security and as secretary of the National Security Council. However, disputes over personal interests for power and wealth ended up in Dahlan being expelled from Fatah and the PA in 2011, and many of his supporters in the West Bank have been imprisoned and expelled from the movement. This divide is understood as an indication of the extent of the chaos and bitter succession crisis within Fatah.

Another form of the party's internal rivalry surfaces in times of national crisis and intensified Israeli aggression. For instance, Fatah's experience in the second intifada highlights two contradictory trends. The first was represented by Fatah's military wing, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which favored challenging Israel militarily and cooperated closely with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The second was led by the mainstream moderate trend that sought to





put an end to the second intifada, reach a negotiable solution with Israel, continue security coordination with Israel, and maintain the existence of the PA—this was comprised of the higher echelon of Fatah and the PA. Tensions between these two trends have occasionally taken violent forms, and resulted in the emergence of armed militias in the last phase of the second intifada that caused a situation of chaos and fear in Palestinian towns. However, after the death of Arafat in 2004 and the end of the second intifada in 2005, Fatah experienced a new episode of transformation. The balance of power favored Fatah's moderate trend under the leadership of Abbas who, after his election as president of the PA in 2005, moved to disband Fatah's militant groups, absorbed them into the PA security apparatus, and neutralized leaders who could potentially pose a challenge to his authority.

Fatah's Sixth and Seventh General Congress held in Bethlehem in 2009 and in Ramallah in 2016, demonstrated the movement's political, structural and ideological stagnation. The Congress had not met over the preceding two decades, despite party regulations that call for elections every five years. The holding of both Congresses was motivated by Abbas's desire to transform what remained of Fatah into a political party devoted to building a Palestinian state alongside Israel, to reassert his leadership despite the erosion of his public legitimacy, and to marginalize internal opponents. While most of Fatah's younger constituents hoped that the Congress would bridge the generational gap, the results consolidated Abbas's grip. A decisive factor was the role played by Israel, which prevented most Fatah delegates in exile from joining the event—only a few, closely associated with Abbas, participated. The reason for holding the Congress elections stemmed from two perceptions. First, Fatah's constituents perceived the Congress as an opportunity for change within the movement's organs and to bridge the generational gap between the "old guard" and "young guard." This, however, was not accompanied by a new political program or strategy reflecting a critical or reformist trend within the movement, but rather was based on the desire by the younger generation for power-sharing within the same Oslo paradigm. Second, Abbas's desire to transform the remaining aspects of the movement's national liberation character into an institutionalized political party devoted to building a Palestinian state alongside Israel. There were many reservations by Fatah cadres and external observers about the authenticity and transparency of the elections.³⁸ According to the author's conversations with many Fatah cadres during the periods of the congress (August, 2009 and December 2016), there is a broad belief that the elections primarily served as a mechanism to settle the party's power struggle in favor of Abbas and his circle.

While the outcomes of the Sixth and Seventh General Congress were conducive to some sort of stability for Abbas and his loyalists, this did not





remedy the party's internal disarray and the leadership crisis.³⁹ The post-Oslo Fatah is caught between structural limitations and serious challenges. It represents an extreme case of the transformation that engulfed the very structure, fabric and perception of the Palestinian national movement after Oslo. As the largest faction that dominated the politics, financial resources and center of power of the PLO and the PA for almost half a century, Fatah has been discredited and blamed for the massive setbacks and persistent failure of the Palestinian national movement. Being a state-party without a state, governing an authority under military occupation, with persistent insistence on pursuing non-existent peace negotiations, Fatah politics has largely become irrelevant for a national liberation movement.

HAMAS: BETWEEN GOVERNANCE AND RESISTANCE

Despite its relatively recent rise compared with other Palestinian nationalist and secularist factions, the Islamic Resistance Movement (more popularly known by its Arabic acronym, Hamas, [*Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyyah*]) became a significant pillar of the post-Oslo Palestinian political spectrum. Since its foundation during the First Intifada in 1987, Hamas has been the leading actor of political Islam in Palestine, representing an Islamic alternative that differs significantly from the PLO national project and its secularist character. Hamas's Islamist ideology is of dual character. The first is of a universal dimension rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought, which established its presence in Palestine in the 1940s. The second is reflected in the movement's peculiar status as a Palestinian militant group devoted to anti-colonial struggle and a civilian-social movement that seeks to influence society to accept and practice Islamic values.⁴⁰

From the beginning, Hamas contested the PLO's historic status as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and positioned itself as a fierce competitor of Fatah. It rejected the Oslo Accords and its underlying negotiating process, and after the establishment of the PA in 1994 it sought to exercise counter-politics outside the PA structure. Thus, Hamas challenged the PA hegemony at different levels. First, it rejected the PA as a legitimate national project, and refrained from participating in the PA institutions and the general elections held in 1996. Second, the movement mobilized its popular base against the Oslo framework and advocated armed struggle against Israel. Hamas's influential counter-politics to the Oslo framework and considerable popular support has, therefore, allowed the movement to become dominant enough to enforce itself as an opposition force in the forefront of Palestinian politics.





Several factors contributed to Hamas's growing prominence during the 1990s. Politically, the expansion of Hamas came at a crucial time for the PLO factions, which were undergoing deepening crisis and a failure to pursue an effective liberation strategy. In particular, Hamas managed to fill the void left by the steady decline of the Palestinian left and its inability to produce a viable alternative to the PA project. In this context, Hamas represented an alternative political route to the PLO-Fatah-PA peace process and countered the Oslo process through discourses and actions that reflected its commitment to resistance. Ideologically, Hamas used a popularly appealing religious discourse, which depicts the movement as the vanguard of Islam in Palestine in a way that redefines Palestinian identity and struggle in Islamic terms. Socially, Hamas managed to establish and consolidate its cultural and ideological influence over various social groups. Its vibrant networks of charitable, cultural, medical and educational associations operating at the grassroots level and among the poorest strata have enhanced Hamas's credibility and expanded its social base.⁴¹ These social networks nurtured the movement's mobilizational and recruitment capabilities, and ensured loyal social constituents. Financially, the rising popularity of political Islam in the Arab and Islamic worlds opened the doors for donations and other forms of support from Palestinians in the diaspora, as well as other states, wealthy individuals, Islamic organizations and organized popular campaigns.⁴² Organizationally, Hamas maintains a coherent internal structure and relations, which are based on strong discipline and organization. Its hierarchy is based on a sophisticated division between the political, military, social and administrative branches, as well as external and internal leadership.⁴³ This has allowed the movement to maintain an influential presence on the ground even in periods of crisis and in the face of Israeli and PA hindrance.

When the Second Intifada erupted in September 2000, Hamas initially kept a low profile and was not actively involved in its early period. Part of the reason stems from Hamas's suspicious stance towards the uprising, fearing that it was driven by the PA leadership in order to improve its negotiating position. However, with its increasing militarization and signs that the uprising was spiraling out of the control of the PA, Hamas's military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, joined the uprising and rapidly became a central actor in the military action against Israel. On the ground, Hamas's military wing cooperated closely with other Palestinian factions such as Islamic Jihad and Fatah militants.

By the end of the Second Intifada, Hamas began to moderate its position, hinting at accepting the two-state solution, announcing the end of suicide bombings, and declaring its willingness to join the formal political process. A significant shift in Hamas's perception towards the PA occurred in 2006,





when it competed in the legislative elections and won a large majority in the Palestinian parliament; a striking victory that dramatically shook Fatah's historical dominance over official institutions. Hamas marketed its shifting position as a result of the realization that the Oslo reality had died by the bullets of the Second Intifada, and that the movement ought to play an active role in reshaping the post-intifada political order.⁴⁴ While Hamas's overwhelming electoral victory was accompanied by official statements that explicitly demonstrated its acceptance of the two-state settlement, the international community, led by the United States, boycotted the democratically-elected government and halted financial aid to PA institutions.

The halting of western aid to the PA constituted one mechanism within a wider plan aimed at undermining the Hamas government and bringing back Fatah to power. In fact, while Western donors halted aid to the Hamas-led government, they continued to provide special financial assistance to President Abbas and his security apparatuses.⁴⁵ Israeli and Western interference in internal Palestinian affairs fueled tensions between Hamas and Fatah, which resulted in a semi-civil war in 2007 that ended Fatah control over the Gaza Strip. With two de facto divided governments in Gaza and the West Bank, the Palestinian political field reached its worst level of fragmentation since the emergence of the Palestinian national movement.

After the split, Hamas found itself in charge of governing the Gaza Strip, managing its institutions and security situation and the daily life of millions of Palestinians under a crippling Israeli siege.⁴⁶ Hamas's move towards building a governing apparatus required that the movement concentrate its efforts in formalized governmental tasks and careful calculation of its political moves, a matter that obstructed its character as a resistance movement.

Hamas's governance of the Gaza Strip has had certain features. First, Hamas allows PLO and non-PLO military groups to operate in the Strip under its instructions and directions. This means that Hamas permits resistance groups to acquire arms and conduct military training, but it strictly forbids these groups from waging attacks against Israeli targets without its consent. Second, despite the fact that Hamas is a religious movement that seeks to create a disciplined society according to the Muslim Brotherhood's interpretation of Islamic society, its governance of Gaza has been controversial. On the one hand, secularists and nationalists criticize Hamas because of its conservative mode of governance, which tends to impose restrictive social rules and suppress civil liberties. On the other hand, ultraconservatives and Salafi Islamists view Hamas's governance of Gaza as unrepresentative of authentic Islamic rule. Third, while designated as a "terrorist group" by many Western governments and regarded as an illegitimate government by many others, Hamas attempted to embrace an active foreign policy to break the Israeli





siege and challenge the Ramallah-based PA monopoly over external representation and diplomatic relations. For this purpose, the Hamas government organized training programs for diplomats, and attempted through different regional channels to reach European capitals and initiate dialogue with Western leaders. And fourth, Hamas's rule over Gaza is highly centralized and not representative of Palestinian political pluralism. Its security forces have occasionally violently suppressed opposition groups and arrested journalists, with Fatah members receiving the harshest treatment.

In terms of economic governance, the Hamas-controlled tunnel economy constituted a vital source for Gaza's survival amid the suffocating Israeli blockade. Through taxes and tariffs collected by Hamas on goods and materials flowing through underground tunnels with Egypt, Hamas managed to cover the government's expenditures and the payment of salaries for its civil servants. The tunnel economy in Gaza, as a new trade route, also caused considerable changes in Gaza's class structure as it marginalized the traditional business class and created a new class of *nouveaux riche* that depended on tunnel smuggling and trade.⁴⁷ After the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt by the military junta in 2013, Egypt began to tighten its border closure with Gaza to an unprecedented extent, leading to a quasi-total collapse of the tunnel networks between Gaza and Egypt. (For more on Gaza and the rule of Hamas, see the chapter by Toufic Haddad in this book.)

Fearful of a Hamas takeover of the West Bank, the Fatah-dominated PA in Ramallah initially struggled to reassert its authority. It announced a state of emergency in June 2007 and moved to disband Hamas organizationally and militarily. The PA security forces arbitrarily detained Hamas officials, activists and affiliated students, referring them to the military instead of the civilian judiciary, in contravention of the Palestinian Basic Law.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in its attempt to crack down on Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank, the PA security forces targeted Hamas-affiliated television and radio stations, and shut down dozens of charitable and social associations. Human Rights Watch reported that the PA's repressive campaigns against Hamas came "with the political and financial support of Israel, the United States and European Union, which likewise wanted to see Hamas's influence in Palestinian politics reduced or eliminated."⁴⁹ While the PA campaign has seriously damaged Hamas's infrastructure, it is difficult to assess its actual capabilities in the West Bank given its underground organizational structure

Nevertheless, Hamas's popularity has not significantly decreased; in fact, it tends to exceed Fatah's popularity especially in the periods following Israeli aggressions on the Gaza Strip. For example, the main finding of the Palestinian Public Opinion Poll, conducted four months after the 2014 war on Gaza, suggests that "the popularity of Hamas and Ismail Haniyeh remains higher.





Indeed, Hamas would easily win a new presidential election if one was held today; it would also likely do better than Fatah in a new parliamentary election.⁵⁰ Indications of Hamas's popularity has been evidenced in the student council elections that have taken place at Birzeit University in recent years—elections which are widely regarded as a bellwether for national politics, and which saw the Hamas-aligned student bloc winning most of the seats.

POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE: EXPERIENCING POLYGONAL CRISIS

Once a leading political and military actor in the Palestinian national movement that left a substantial imprint on the evolution and development of the Palestinian left, the PFLP after Oslo underwent persistent crisis that pushed it to a marginal status in the Palestinian political milieu. Yet, while it is considered the largest leftist faction and the second largest faction within the PLO, the post-Oslo PFLP failed to revive its influence and popularity, despite several attempts to do so. By the early 1990s, the PFLP began to lose ground and political influence due to multiple crises resulting from various international, regional and local realignments.⁵¹ Strategically, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dramatic shift in the global balance of power in favor of Western capitalist hegemony had a profound impact on the international left including the PFLP. While the PFLP had not consistently maintained warm ties with the USSR due to ideological differences, there is no doubt that the fall of the USSR dramatically weakened the PFLP, as was the case with the left worldwide. In addition, the demise of revolutionary anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements around the world left the PFLP with fragmented and weak allies. Ideologically, the PFLP, as part of the international radical left, experienced a serious ideological crisis resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and its style of Communism, as well as the decline of the ideas and popularity of Arab nationalism (which had failed to achieve any of its promised objectives, either in unifying Arab nations or in liberating Palestine). The ideological retreat of revolutionary leftist ideas and secular Arab nationalism aided the rise of political Islam in Palestine, which has expanded at the expense of leftist factions. Politically, the Oslo process and the establishment of the PA constituted a central political challenge to all Palestinian rejectionist parties. While the PFLP uncompromisingly rejected the Oslo Accords and refrained from participating in the PA general elections in 1996 and the PA institutions, it failed to produce a viable theoretical and practical alternative to the political and institutional reality introduced by the Oslo process.



Many leftists, including many PFLP cadres, attribute the decline of PFLP popularity, in part, to factors associated with donors' intervention and conditions at the level of civil society. In particular, the construction of a professional NGO sector has replaced the democratic, critical, inclusive and open-access popular movements that formed a significant part of the social and political force of the PFLP's grassroots linkages in the pre-Oslo era. The NGO sector has absorbed considerable segments of the PFLP leaders and cadres, who despite utter opposition to the Oslo reality, have found themselves trapped in implementing predefined agendas in service of PA state-building and the Oslo peace process.⁵²

In an attempt to save itself from the brink of political irrelevancy, the PFLP held its Sixth National Conference in 2000. A significant outcome of this conference was the resignation of its founder and historical leader, George Habash, and the election of its second Secretary General, Abu Ali Mustafa (nom du guerre of Mustafa Zibri). As part of a new strategy to revive the centrality of the PFLP in Palestinian politics, Abu Ali Mustafa returned to the OPT from Damascus. While this move marked an important shift towards relocating the PFLP centers of power to the OPT, Palestinians differed in their interpretation of the new strategy and the real objective behind Mustafa's return. Some interpreted it as an implicit acceptance of the two-state solution as introduced by the Oslo Accords, while others saw the return as a strategic option enforced by the new national and regional reality, which required new modes of resistance to be oriented and initiated from inside the territories.⁵³ Mustafa's return was featured with his slogan "we return to resist not to surrender."

This slogan of his return was translated on the ground into a renewal of the PFLP's organizational infrastructure and a reactivation of its militancy from the outset of the second intifada in 2000. In addition, under the leadership of Abu Ali Mustafa, the various leftist parties engaged in serious debates in an attempt for unification. However, his leadership inside the OPT lasted only briefly as he was assassinated by two Israeli rockets that targeted his office in Ramallah in 2001. Ahmad Sa'adat, who became the third Secretary General of the PFLP, vowed to pursue the same revolutionary path and retaliate for Mustafa's assassination. Shortly afterwards, the PFLP's military wing, the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, was formed and claimed responsibility for the killing of the far-right Israeli government minister, Rehavam Ze'evi, who was a leading advocate of the Zionist strategy of "transfer."⁵⁴

The assassination of Ze'evi marked a turning point in the trajectory of the second intifada as it resulted in the immediate intensification of Israeli aggression and a partial military reoccupation of Palestinian towns and cities in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, in response to combined Israeli and



US pressure, the PA banned the PFLP military wing and in 2002 it arrested Sa'adat and three party militants who were then held in a PA prison in Jericho under the supervision of US and British guards for almost five years. In 2006, the Israeli military stormed the Jericho prison, abducting Sa'adat and five fellow prisoners and transferred them to Israeli military prisons where they are still imprisoned.

While the PFLP's military role in the second intifada made a ripple in otherwise stagnant waters, the assassinations and arrests of its senior leaders and cadres, coupled with the organization's inability to renovate itself along new political and ideological lines, have imposed significant limitations on its attempt to revive the importance of leftist politics.

An important shift in the PFLP's stance towards political engagement in PA institutions occurred in the second presidential and legislative elections in 2005 and 2006, respectively. First, while the PFLP did not officially nominate any candidate to run for presidential elections, it backed the leader of the Palestinian National Initiative (PNI), Mustafa Barghouti, who came second after Mahmoud Abbas. In the legislative elections in 2006, despite failed attempts to unify Palestinian leftist factions in one electoral list, the PFLP won three seats in the PNC. The PFLP motives to participate in the PA elections despite its rejectionist position to the Oslo framework stemmed from its belief (like Hamas) that the Oslo process had been killed in the second intifada, and it sought to counter Fatah dominance and contribute to reshaping the post-intifada political reality.

However, the internal Palestinian schism and division between the West Bank and Gaza distorted the post-intifada political reality. While disastrous for the cohesiveness of the Palestinian national movement, the vacuum left by the Fatah–Hamas chasm and the growing popular disappointment with the bipolar political division provided a historic opportunity for the PFLP and the left to reemerge as an alternative force, and advance an alternative political program and new national strategy. However, despite its persistent calls for national unity, the PFLP failed to take advantage of the division and present itself as a unifying force. Instead it found itself hostage to the political division, which occasionally resulted in incoherent statements between its Gaza and West Bank branches.

Part of the PFLP's inability to act as an influential actor in the post-Second Intifida era can be attributed to the PFLP's financial dependency on PLO allocations, which are fully controlled by Fatah and the president of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas. The PLO allocations distributed to the PLO factions are often used to pressurise these factions and weaken their opposition to the PA. This has proved to be problematic for PFLP political independence and has hindered its ability to influence political reality. For example, when the





PFLP pulled out of the PLO executive sessions in April 2014 in opposition to Abbas's willingness to continue negotiations and security coordination with Israel, Abbas ordered the suspension of the PFLP's financial allocations to pressure it to change its position.⁵⁵

In November 2014, the PFLP held its Seventh General Congress under secret conditions. According to the PFLP statement, the main objectives were "to carry out a comprehensive review and evaluation of the Front's methods, work, overall policies and plans, and the formulation of a political vision and organizational methods for the new phase of struggle."⁵⁶ During the Congress, several leaders resigned and new younger members were elected for the party's Central Committee and General Political Bureau. While the PFLP's intention was to resurrect its former prominence in Palestinian politics, in reality, after the Seventh General Congress the party has not shown any sign of revival, nor can it survive its long-standing crises.

CONCLUSION: REBUILDING THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT BEYOND THE OSLO FRAMEWORK

In the past few years (2012–2017) there have been several waves of popular uprisings in various localities in the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, and among 48 Palestinians. These waves were sparked by multiple connected issues such as Israel's continued colonization of the West Bank, the tightening of blockade over Gaza, the Judaization of East Jerusalem, and the constant violations of the status quo regarding Al-Aqsa Mosque and religious sites in Jerusalem. While all of these issues can be interpreted as viable objective conditions sufficient for the outbreak of a fully-fledged intifada, the subjective conditions necessary to transform these waves into a sustained and organized revolutionary dynamic are effectively absent. In fact, Palestinian political factions and civil society organizations that have historically constituted the key source of leadership, mobilization, orientation and organization have not shown any sign of organized engagement on the ground. Perhaps, at this point, it can be observed that the Palestinian political factions are unable or unwilling to lead a new intifada for various objective and subjective reasons: internal divisions, interest politics and privileges, weak and competing leadership, detachment from the grassroots, lack of mobilization and organizational fragmentations—all of which are a result of the exhausting Oslo process.

The Oslo framework and its associated institutions such as the PA and the kind of political, economic, security and civil relations it built with Israel have always constituted mechanisms of cooption, subversion and capitulation. The continuation of this status will therefore likely abort efforts to reconstitute the





national movement and will block the emergence of new forces and leadership. Thus, it is impossible to imagine the Palestinian national movement—whether in the form of the PLO or a new organization—rising again under the same conditions that led to its deterioration, division and decline.

Much has been written about the desired features for reconstituting the national movement—that it should be organizationally democratic, representative of the people, unifying for all factions, ideologically and politically pluralistic, inclusive and accountable, and should be based on anti-colonial principles of self-determination, liberation, social justice and equality. Nevertheless, few, if any, have envisioned a national movement that advances a sophisticated strategy that completely breaks with the Oslo framework. And this really should constitute the main focus: if Palestinians do not begin by rebuilding their national movement beyond the Oslo framework, what remains of the national movement will likely suffer further fragmentation, disintegration and degeneration.

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